All of Me

by Maiya
Murasaki

Illustrations by
Tomochan

ISBN: Pending
Copyright © 2024 Maiya Murasaki

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed or recreated by any means, including mechanical and technical means, nor through information storage and retrieval systems without explicit consent from the author, except in cases of brief quotations for forms of academic work, critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses as permitted by copyright law.

Table of Contents

All of Me 1
Table of Contents 3
Preface 7
Acknowledgments 8
Part One- Our Adventure Will Never End 10
A Past not Yet Past/1 10
The Burden of Knowledge/2 25
The Roar of Hate/3 37
Reflections Ten Thousand Meters Deep/4 46
Once In a Lifetime/5* 54
As Stars Cross/6* 58
A Wish to Decide the Future/7 65
With Passion and Purpose/8 75
A Past Already Past/9 84
Floating Future View/10 93
XI 105
Part Two- Alter Idem 107
Spiral/1 107
Precious Heart/2 122
Everlong/1* 131
Creeping Silence/3 139
Nonstop/4 151
If I Cry/5 164
Under Moonlight/2* 171
Aion’s Twin/6 173
Stray Child/7 189
Part Three-Autonomous Oblivion 199
White Noise/1 199

House of Wolves/2 206
Before the Night is Over/3 220
Piece of Soul/4 229
Peace of Soul/5 236
Quiet Romance/6 252
Singing Up in Rain/7 264
Feelings/8 273
Emotions/9 289
Lost Innocence/10 294
Part Four- Sins of the Innocent 301
New Order-1 301
If Only/1 304
Shooting Star/2 313
Incarnation of Pessimism/3 323
Aion in the Underworld/4 329
Girls Night Out/5 339
After Dark-2 347
Dramatic-3 356
No New World-4 371
Awakening/6 381
Part Five- After One Thousand Years 386
After One Thousand Years/1 386
The Beginning of The End/2 395
Lying from You/3 410
From the Inside/4 426
Somewhere I Belong/5 433
You’re not Here/6 445
ζ′ 461
η′ 477

θ′ 489
Birth of a God/ι′ 499
Done and Dusted 511
“The Conspiracy of Leng” 517
Part Six- Enigma Engine 521
Thus Said-1 521
Beyond this Night/1 525
The Girl from Ginza-2 529
One Dream-3 538
The Killers/2 545
08-M08+09–4 548
Tonight-5 561
Today/3 571
Live In Japan 581
\All the Universe’s Darkness 591
Paradigm 603
Part Seven- All of Me 615
Memories in Dreams 615
Reality 627
After the Rain 637
Last Goodbye 652
Delisionalism 663
Mother of Dishonesty 675
The End 686

Preface

Hello, I'm Murasaki. Nice to meet you. My intent with this story was to be a fan fiction that also functioned as a diary. It ended up a lot more than a place to vent by start of the first chapter. The characters are all amazing people who can do all the cool things I can't. To get back at them for this, I make them go through all the troubles I did have. Metaphorically, not literally.

In this story you will be joining Cassandra Watson on a journey of the self. At times, the point of view will shift to another character. This will often be Aion. Cassandra and Aion are my two halves. My optimism and my pessimism. These two characters are often the vessels I used to try understanding the array of emotions I've gone through in my life.

I attempted to make each chapter in each part last only as long as it needed to without being too overbearing. This resulted in various chapter lengths across seven parts. That might bother some of you and I apologise in advance for it. Unless of course you've already completed the story and are reading this after the fact. In that case, I'm also sorry! I hope each chapter serves as a bite of a greater meal that you can enjoy at your leisure without feeling overwhelmed by the amount of text.

This story and it's characters are fictitious, however, certain long-standing institutions, agencies, public offices and characters are mentioned that exist(ed) and abide by facts I have researched. I have condensed certain situations with these offices and characters to create faithful but entirely imaginary situations. This book is not intended to hurt nor criticise any real life victims. Any similarity to real situations is purely coincidental. Really!

This is my life's work. Everything I have seen, felt, heard, and experienced, is found within these pages. Thank you for letting me share with you. This book goes out to all the punks who live and fight against the injustice and hate they get every day of their lives when they only want to be themselves.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, my partner Tomochan, who meticulously drew Aion, Cass and all the other characters to really bring them to life. My university literature and linguistics professors, who taught me and had me read all manner of literature from Ancient Greece to Modern Anglo which inspires much of the background of the story. My Japanese instructor who made me truly appreciate Japanese culture, language and aided my unique learning approach. I would like to thank all of my test readers for helping out, keeping an eye on things I might've missed. I also want to thank a special friend and his literature club of incredibly cute girls who instilled within me the confidence to write this story. Without him, I might not have even lived long enough to tell this tale… And last but not least, the two who originally inspired this writing, Amelia Watson and Ouro Kronii.

This page is intentionally blank.

Part One- Our Adventure Will Never End

"What is a drop to an Ocean?"

A Past not Yet Past/1

"Now you know the truth. The end of the end. The big bang that closes out in unceremonious silence. As all the light of the universe finally dims and fades to black. As the celestial bodies of the universe freeze, and time itself, falls to a standstill. Should you not instead, be able to choose your own ending?"

My right-hand takes hold of my left. I'm shaking, I know I'm shaking, I'm trying to not shake. It hurts. I know it hurts. My breaths are short. I'm panicking, I'm at least conscious enough to recognise this. It's as if every butterfly to ever exist is sitting in my stomach. It's an endless abyss of dread that is overwhelming me. My eyes still trained forward, staring at her. I'm trying my damnedest to not lose it, to keep my mind from breaking. I messed up; I wasn't supposed to end up here. Gotta keep my head occupied. Think. Think! How did I end up here? Retrace your steps, what went wrong? I'm the only person with this ability, there shouldn't be anybody else here. If someone else is here then that person must be-

"Nothing to say? Were you listening? Are you still all up there in your head? Surely you can crack one more of those quips with that smart mouth of yours."

She's egging you on, trying to get you to crack. She wants you to do something, don't do it. Just… just try to get a hold of yourself. Ok, my watch, where is my watch? If I could remember where it was I'd feel a lot better.

Tick Tock Tick Tock

What?! What is that sound? Something other than her voice? Is it a clock? Yeah. Yeah, it sounds like a grandfather clock. I can hear it… The *Ticks* and *Tocks*…Were they always there?! I guess I'm in worse shape than I had thought. Heh… Alright… The sound is oddly calming. But where is it coming from? I muster the strength to turn my head to the right. Slowly, agonisingly slowly. I turn for what feels like an eternity. It's a bench? No wait, there's something on it? I can't tell what it is… but I can at least see something. I take a deep breath. I think I can conquer this paralysing fear. Taking a few moments, I let go of my arm and force both of my hands towards my jacket. Ah, no good. Not there either.

"Oh, are you looking for something? Perhaps this? My Dear Watson."

She raises her left arm. Her hand opens up and out falls my watch. She dangles it by its chain, her face completely indifferent. Is she teasing me or? Well, thoughts for later. I need to get my watch back.

"Here. Take it." A surprise, but one I'll gladly take.

She extends her arm forward and opens her hand completely, the watches chain slides through her fingers. It drops to the ground but wait, it didn't make any sound. Hold on a second, I can't see it anymore either!

"Having trouble Watson? Take it. I implore you. "

I can't see anything. What happened? When did this happen? How long has it been happening for? Did I only see the outline of it? I'm losing it. My head creeps back to the right and sure enough, I can only see the outline of the bench and the figure on it. It's too dark to see anything. I didn't realise it was dark moments ago. Am I seeing things? Does this count as seeing things if they're there but not there but actually there? Ok, I'm at least getting control of my senses again. So, why can't I see my watch. What's wrong here. It's dark, but I can make out the bench. Why can't I make out the watch. Where did I end up? Have we been standing in the dark the entire time?

“Something the matter, Watson?”

I take a deep breath, in and out a few times, just to work up to speaking. Who knows how long it’s been.

“I…” Faintly, my voice exits.

I'm winded already. There’s a ton of pressure on my chest. My breaths come out heavy and intense. Deep breaths, deep breaths. Try again, you can do it Watson. Ok.

“I can’t see it, Aion.”

“Aion, Aion, Aion… How long has it been since I last heard that name? Not since… hahaha… the last time you were here Cassandra.” She covers her face with her left hand and laughs. Did I say something funny? Or maybe she’s trying to make me lose my nerve.

Now I have a million thoughts racing across my head. It was her! I had a feeling. It is her job to watch over time and all that. Ok, keep calm. Whatever she’s doing, whatever she said, doesn’t matter. I need to get back, back home. To my friends. Wait, what? Last time? Have I been here before? No, it doesn’t matter, surviving is what matters. And I’ll…

Aion raises her right hand, snapping her fingers. Around the outline of her body, the world lights up at her command.

A warm glow covers us. I wince away for a moment, the light blinds me. I need to adjust to the sudden shock. As I open my eyes, I don’t know what to think of the sight that enters my head. I feel like I just woke up. My gaze settles on Aion’s flawless figure. Her blinding white hair cut into a perfect bob. Her flawless porcelain skin. Her uniform is certainly more expensive than mine. The black leather dress demands of you to cherish what you are staring at. Finally, her beautiful ocean blue eyes. She's perfect. What am I saying? I return my focus to the area around us.

We’re in a desert! That’s why dropping the watch didn’t make any noise! It fell into sand! I don’t know why I’m so excited about this development, but it’s a good feeling and I’m running with it.

Aion points down at the watch, further fuelling my excitement. My ticket out of here! I raise both of my hands to my face and slap both of my cheeks to “wake” myself up. The refreshing feeling runs through my body as if I splashed my face with water. My spirits are high, let’s do this! Left foot, right foot, left foot, right foot. Amazing, simply walking gives me such an accomplishing feeling. I must’ve been in really bad shape earlier. I gaze over Aion, her frame as imposing as ever. Still a beauty though. I wonder what skin regimen the Goddess of Time uses to stay that flawless…

Aion’s finger remains trained at my watch; it sits almost too comfortably in the sand. My steps finally reach it. I guess that also puts me within arm’s reach of Aion, but she’s standing still, as if she were frozen in time. Her porcelain skin glimmers in the light. I wouldn’t be surprised if she had the lighting set up to further enhance her looks. Her beauty is most definitely a part of her charm. Why am I so focused on her looks? What a fearsome woman. She's running around in my head and she hasn't even done anything to me yet. But wait a second. Earlier, didn’t she say, “Take it back?” She said that right? I know I’ve been a complete mess the entire time I’ve been here but, is she inferring that I had given it to her? Why would I give it to her?

I crouch down and reach out into the sand, shifting it a bit to pull out my watch. Glancing at the face of the it, it's definitely mine. The cute little heart is sitting right in the centre of it. I pull myself back up and blow on it to get any remaining sand off. There it is. My reflection. I look a little worse for wear but yeah, it’s me.

I look up at Aion, she’s still silent but her head turns slightly to the left. What’s on her left. Oh, that's right, the bench. Well, I guess I’ll give it a peek too since it seems to have captured her attention.

My head creeps over to the right, my eyes still on her while I turn. Just as a precaution. Slowly, they make their way over with the rest of my head. I can’t believe what comes into my vision. I blink a few times in disbelief. Am I crazy? I must be, because it's me. I’m the one sitting on the

bench, asleep. What in the world is going on?

“Surprised? Shocked? Scared? Tell me Cassandra, what do you think of yourself? Doesn’t she look serene? Into the end and beyond, she sits here alone, as punishment for her sin.”

“What?! Sin? What did she do?”

I look back at Aion, her face is still neutral. It’s actually unnerving that she’s showing zero emotion. Don’t let it get to you Watson. I look back over at the mysterious girl. It looks like she’s holding a book. I guess she needed something to keep her occupied.

“I see your eyes have spied upon the prize, Cassandra. Interested? ”

“What is it, Aion? A book? You found something that caught your eye? Must be a pretty good one to take with you to the end of eternity.”

“Heh, there’s the cute quip. I will miss them. Not as much as I will you, but I’ll miss them.”

“You’ll what? What do you mean you'll miss me? What’s going on here?”

“This is the final diary, Cassandra. Your final diary. 18782, your job is complete.”

“My timeline number? Huh? What do you mean job? What is going on Aion?”

“The job is complete, thanks to 37564. For her to decide the end, to finish it. I had summoned every available version of you from every timeline here to me. You are the final one. It’s time to retire, Cassandra.”

“What finished? What do you mean?” An idea pops into my head. That might be why I returned the watch.

“I was curious to say the least, about why you couldn’t remember. I wanted to see what I could spur within you. Unfortunately, you seem just as lost as when we started. I figured this would happen. Oh well, at this point, nothing matters.”

Tick Tock

Tick Tock

My head shifts back towards the resting, parallel version of me on the bench. Further back is a giant clock. That thing's massive! Is my watch based on that thing? The sand is swallowing the clock up. In fact, it looks like it's half way sunken in. The numbers past four and eight are already hidden underneath the world. The ticking sounds are coming from this thing, I'm sure of it. But enough about that. I need to return my focus to Aion.

Alright, think Cass, think! Something bad is going on here. I might be able to buy a little time by travelling back to some point in the past. Although, I need to go a point after meeting Althea. That way we can all work as a team to get something going before Aion finds me. No, Aion would expect me to meet up with Althea. That might endanger her and the others. What can I do without looking suspicious to Aion?

I look back down at my watch. I guess I can try spinning the dial back a bit. She said the End of Time, right? Wait, did I say the End of Time? How did I know it was the End of Time? Questions for later! Strange how I've second guessed myself several times already though.

Whatever! I'd need to spin this thing for a while to get back. On top of that, it's also way too obvious. But unfortunately, this is all I have to work with. I'll need to at least distract Aion a bit. Take her attention and keep her occupied with something else. Alright, I'll chat her up for a bit then see where it goes from there.

"Aion, what were you saying when I arrived here. I didn't really catch all that."

"What was I saying? I wasn't saying anything Cassandra. I summoned you and you showed up. Nothing else has happened."

"Nothing else? I guess the summon must've messed with my head a bit…" I trail off. We were standing here? In the dark? In pure silence? What the heck?! Well, at least I don't think she's noticed me rolling the watch back.

"Cass, come on. You think I wouldn't notice you trying to time travel? You're not seriously trying

to run away from me are you?”

“Aion, what do you mean? I’m just standing here. I haven’t done anything!” She knew! She totally knows. Of course she knows.

“This area is my domain, an extension of myself. My cosmic egg.”

“Oh wow! It’s so beautiful! I really like the endless sand and that cutie over there on the bench!” Aion stares at me with a blank face. She caught me but she hasn’t stopped me. That’s actually odd. Why isn’t she stopping me?

“Yes, the endless sands of time. Simple, straight and to the point.” Aion’s face starts to widen! She’s smiling. It’s a great smile. Her beauty is dreamlike.

Dammit, she’s plotting something, and I’m dumbfounded by her smile. Anyways, I'll try to travel to whatever time I dialled back to and then go from there. If she threatens me or tries anything I'll make the jump in time! Heh heh heh.

“Perhaps you were… Ah, I see. Interesting.”

“What are you muttering, Aion? You can tell me! I might be able to help!”

“Oh, Cassandra. I will get straight to the point. There is no point. It’s over. This is the end of time. You know what this means.”

“Aww c’mon Aion.. For your ol’ pal Cass? One last time?” I kick my foot into the ground and pout.

Aion heavily sighs, the smile on her face drips away. Back to her impeccable neutral position. She spends a moment in silence.

“Alright Cass, for my “ol’ pal,” as you put it. I did enjoy spending time with *you* the most. It was delightful. Those days meant a lot to me.”

“Thank you Aion. It's just, y’know it’s in my blood! I’m an investigator! It’s my job to solve mysteries!”

“Right. Well, I will indulge your final request, Detective.”

Aion adjusts her hair, pushing her bangs out of her face and pats down her dress. She starts to walk towards the clock or is it the bench? Well, they’re both in the same direction. Then she stops in between the clock and the bench. What's that about? Is there something there? Wait… is that? Are those? Those are graves! What the hell?!

“You saw the memories of the previous Cassandra Watson. To be more specific, the Cassandra that was here before you.” Aion says.

“The Cassandra Watson here before me? What happened to her.”

“Correct. The Watson before you” Aion pushes out her left arm and points towards the Cassandra on the bench. “There she sits, her and every Cassandra from every timeline, lay here, in their resting place. You all come from the same source. You all return to the same source. You both will spend time immemorial here. My project was a failure and for that failure you are not worthy.”

“Not worthy?”

“Correct. As my final gesture of my good will, I’ve set all these graves up for every Cassandra that existed.”

“What? What happened? Why were we all summoned here by you Aion?” I'm confused but I'm too curious to not hear the end to this.

“You or rather the Cassandra from timeline 37564, damned all life in this universe. Her timeline is the first, chronologically. She and I have worked together to end every single universe, every single timeline. Her final job was timeline 18782, she has sown the seeds of discord. Chaos will indisputably, undeniably wreak havoc over the final timeline and then it will be complete.”

Her words hit, no they stab me in the chest. Another Cass did what? What did she do? She damned every living thing in the universe? How does that even happen? What the hell is going on? The weight of her words press down on me. I feel it. My body feels like it’s being pushed down

upon by some cosmic force. It's unreal. This is too much. I gotta get out and find someone. Aion's gone crazy. Surely nobody out there just lets this happen. What about The Ministry? Somebody, anybody would've noticed something on a scale large enough to plunge the universe out of balance.

"Cassandra, now it's your turn. Return to nothingness."

"Hang on a sec Aion! Why do I have to go? What? Where am I even going? You can't do this to me. I'm my own person! That wasn't me! I-I had no part in whatever happened!" I hopelessly whine to her; hoping to gain some of her pity. She does love to brag about how perfect she is. A perfect person develops a perfect plan. This might at least get some extra information out of her.

"When chaos or order overwhelm a timeline, it spells doom for the beings within that timeline. When that timeline falls to whichever force had taken over, be it chaos or order, it overflows into the next timeline and that timeline does the same in the end. It's nothing more than dominoes falling down one after another." Aion says with conviction.

"Then what this Cass did spurs the catalyst? This will happen to our timeline too?"

Aion shuts her eyes and nods. She's silent, it almost seems like she's sombre. She must know what will happened. She's the Goddess of Time after all. It's her plan! Nothing is beyond her. Her eyes reopen and her gaze is stuck to the Cassandra on the bench. Why does she keep looking over at her?

"She took my mission and fulfilled it. That is all Cassandra. She did her job. Kept her loyalty to me. And I am delighted that it is now all, FINALLY, over." Aion ends her sentence with enthusiasm and glee. The smile has returned to her face but it's twisted… evil.

"You're happy about this?"

"Happy? Cass, I'm ECSTATIC this has happened. It's the most wonderful feeling you could ever imagine! Here at the end! Now we can all finally DIE!"

"How?! What exactly is so wonderful about that?"

“Cass, Cass, Cass. All you see is a small picture. A single puzzle piece of the greater scene. You’re denizen of a pond that will never understand the ocean. I, have sent an answer to our creators, to the GODS. Life is NOT worth living out. There is NO MEANING to it. Your labours are futile. You exist only to entertain forces you will never meet. Beings that are outside of reality, beyond time, incomprehensible and incomprehensive! The Gods themselves are flawed, FAILURES! No more must life be suffered to be their experiments. I have found the way.”

“Aion, you sound insane. How long have you been like this?!” I say defeated; the despair lay heavy in my voice. This is a dreadful situation.

“How long, Cassandra? I am Time itself. Do you know how long I’ve existed?”

“I guess a pretty long time, Aion.”

“Whenever any creature in any universe, in any timeline, discovers the concept of time, I am sent there. I am to be the sands that record everything that happens. This is my punishment, and I will serve it NO LONGER!”

Aion… I can hear the cries in her voice that are powered by an infinite amount of pain and rage. Her arms push out to the sides of her body, she clenches her fists. She summons one of her blades out of the air. Her gaze sternly fixated upon me.

“Now Cassandra, be a good girl and join up with the rest of them. It’ll be a big ol’ family reunion!” She says, no she orders me to.

I look over at the other Cass. She looks at peace. So cool and calm. What were the last thoughts in her mind as she decided to let it end? I guess this is it. A hopeless situation for a hopeless individual. No, I have to hit the switch. I’ve gotta go back before Aion gets me.

“STOP!” I scream out, trying to at least appear like I’m not quivering in my boots. I pull my watch up and point it at her. She should know what this means. I guess all my talking really did distract her!

“Ahahaha…. Ahahahahaha….AHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA…” Aion maniacally cackles.

“Wh-what’s so funny Aion? Can’t believe I got one up on you?” I say that but…I’m still completely terrified. She’s definitely jumped off of the deep end now.

“Oh, Cass. My sweet Cassandra. My brilliant Detective Watson. You can go back as far as you want. You will find the results less than ideal.”

“Is that a challenge Aion? Because I’m pretty confident in my own abilities!”

“Hit it Cass. Run away. Cower in fear. You will not get far.” She says with a smug voice. Now I’m worried!

“Fine. I’ll go. I’ll go back as far as it takes to solve this incident!” With my final words, I close my eyes activate the time travel.

I open my eyes back up and there it is. It feels so familiar. This dread. This all-consuming feeling of despair.

Is this how *that* Cassandra felt? Is this the despair she stared at in the face as she brought about the end to life in her… in all universes? Why did this other me agree to this? Aion, what happened to you? Guess I’ll never get the answers I’m looking for this time. Heh, what an awful ending. My arms fall to my knees, my knees fall into the sand.

“I took the time crystal out, Cass. C’mon really? Did you really think you’d get away like that?”

I guess I’m clocking out, but maybe there’s one thing she’ll indulge me with. My hands run through the sand; I’m suddenly reminded that this world is an extension of her body. I wonder what this feels like to her.

“Aion, I’ve heard your story. I follow that when chaos or order overflow, it brings ruin to a universe and it’s timeline.”

“Right. So?”

“The first timeline to fall, 67564, the balance there tipped in favour of one extreme and led all the

way to this moment. And not just her timeline, all timelines led here. This Cass… she…"

"Very deductive of you, it seems you did listen to everything I've been saying." Aion remarks with a sneer, but I press on.

"Then the Ministry of Interuniversal Affairs... Your own friends?!" I choke the words out, my nose running, my eyes drowned with sadness. "Eris, she's your catalyst, isn't she?"

"Gone Cassandra. GONE. I have FREED them. SAVED THEM! Slaves to their masters no more! No longer forced to balance a universe, an idea, that their creators abandoned!" She declares, no hint of weakness in her voice. Nothing but sheer determination. She believes in herself, her convictions, her ideals. But, shouldn't I believe in my own too? Aion was saying something about us coming from the same source. What was it? I can't remember but she said something like that. So, I should believe in myself! Alright well, now or never!

"Well, Cass, I'd say this was fun but, we both know it wasn't. I will close the curtain on timeline 18782 and with it, all timelines, all universes will finally end. Farewell, my love."

The light of the world is dimming! What's happening?! Aion! Where did she go? I lost her! Oh no. This is bad! I can't find her. Left, right, forward, behind? Her silhouette is missing. If she's not around me then is she above me? A bright light shines down from the top of the world! It's getting closer and closer. It's her! She's diving at me! Oh no. Oh man. This is it. I have no more options. I fall to my bottom and stare up in despair. The figure nears but wait! That's not Aion! Huh? What?! Who is that!?

The sand shifts in front of me. My attention immediately darts to it. There she is! There's Aion! Did she skip time to drop down quicker?! She's coming after me! She's so fast! Aion is going to kill me! I pick myself up as best I can, but unfortunately, I trip over my own feet and fall back down. I immediately flip in place to look back at Aion. I see light glimmering off of her blade as she swings it downwards and I close my eyes. Animals accept their fate and freeze up right? When they're in a

hopeless situation right? Something in their brains release a chemical to make death not as bad right? What the hell am I saying? Well, at least I can crack a smile here at the end.

“For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Those who expect to be saved are hypocrites and claim to be followers when they neither confess or believe! From the depths of despair, the darkest abyss, grant me my indulgences. Let us rejoice as we set this world aflame!” The figure radiantly declares as she descends. Her voice booms over the desert air. It couldn’t be. No way!

“You are not alone Cassandra!” She declares as she lands, effortlessly stopping the blade with her hands! If I weren’t on the receiving end of this attack, I’d say this is pretty cool. Alright, it’s still pretty cool but this is no time to be admiring it. I’m being saved! She shoves Aion back, creating a few steps of distance between us. I stared in awe.

“C-Cassie?! How? Why? Who?” I say completely baffled.

“Oh là là, not “who” Cass. You know my name.” Cassiel replies, her bright voice a song of hope to my ears. An angel just saved my life!

“Right. I know. I've just been through a lot.” I’m still in disbelief but somehow, someway, she’s here.

“Ah, I was wondering when you would show. Interesting. When did you return? No, better yet, who let you return. Unless… hmm I see. Betrayed, was I? I suppose you would be a fair contingency if Watson here was to fail.” Aion says, the sound of saltiness lingering on the ends of her words.

“Well, it seems my friends are willing to throw all the chips down to match your call Aion. C’mon Watson, we don’t have much, heh, time left before the spell ends.” Cassie’s words fill me with a calming feeling. Ah, so bright. Oh man, I’m think fangirling over her. Wait, what did she say?

“Spell?!”

“Spell?!" I say simultaneously with Aion. What did she mean spell?

“Right, a spell! Now why don’t you pick yourself up off your butt and grab my hand!” I follow her words and get up, dusting sand off of my body and nod to her. She slides her hand into mine… it’s warm~

"But to get to the end of time you need…"

She leans towards me and whispers into my ear, “It took a while, but we found a special… tome…thingy… called The Grimoire of the Rift. Althea went over it and well… basically… lets us travel time!” She whispers excitedly; I can tell she’s glad to have found me before it was too late.

“It’s a grimoire by the way, Cassie. It’s literally in the name.” Aion says with a contemptuous tone. She is straight up not having a good time anymore and I am all for it.

“Right, Cassie, this whole place is her world. She calls it her Cosmic Egg. Apparently, she knows everything that happens in here so, we can’t do anything in secret.”

“A Cosmic Egg… I’m familiar with the idea. There's nothing to worry about. Plus, she didn’t notice me arrive, did she? ~ But that’s a story for another day, the spell will take care of the rest.”

I look back at Aion and her eyes are wide open. Piercing my soul with her sharp stare. She was not happy to hear she was unable to notice. Hell, I noticed Cassie before Aion.

“Leave?! You won’t be leaving! As for how you entered, who cares. I have you both now! You WON'T be stopping this one! *Absolute Blade: Bewitching Strike from Beyond!*” Aion hollers as she pulls her blade over her chest. The world shakes. The sands vanish and light from above begins to shine. Under our feet appear many clocks, cloaked in a magical type of aura. The universe unravels itself around us and we now stand among the stars. The clocks gather in a massive circle around Aion. Their hands spin around quicker and quicker with each revolution around their faces. Something big is about to happen! A new light shines above us but this time it's not a saviour. What is that? Is it her sword? It's her sword! Her sword is hurdling down towards us!

"Cassie, if you got another trick or something… NOW'S THE TIME TO USE IT!" In the back of my head, I hear words echo. It's not Cassie's voice… it's… it's Althea's!

"Hark! Your master calls you deliver to me what is mine or I will raze your mind beyond space and time where my allies of darkness will subject you to my torment for centuries to come."

I feel the flow of time shift. I don't know how it's happening, but I'm not complaining! I look over at Cassie's face, she's staring at Aion. Her face fits a cheeky smile across it. I turn towards Aion. She's staring at me, but her gaze changed. She looks… sad. That perfect face of hers, sullied for me?

Finally, a dark circle replaces the light that once sat underneath Cassie and I. I don't know what this is, but it's doing something! I guess this is our ticket out, and as I blink, my eyes open to a familiar sight!

The Burden of Knowledge/2

I keep my eyes trained forward, staring in disbelief. It worked. It actually worked! The spell ends and they vanish from my sight. Crafty, very crafty priestess, but not entirely unexpected.

I thought you weren't supposed to interfere with humanity. A cosmic horror like you…keeping herself bound by her feelings for them. Disgusting. How utterly disappointing. A hero swoops in at the last second and saves the girl? I think I'm physically cringing; this is ridiculous! I need a moment to think about what has happened.

I summoned 18782, she received the memories of 37564 but why? Why did she get them? Why then, at that moment? Up to that point she had no record of successful connection. I tap at my right temple, thinking of a possible answer. I wander over to the bench and take a seat next to Cassandra, staring at her doll-like body.

"What did you do 37546? Why did she inherit your memory? What triggered this?"

Not that I'll receive an answer from her. She's gone. Did her spirit linger? Did the guilt within your soul make you want to save the final version of yourself? No, I would've noticed it. I suppose even you… still had some secrets hidden away. Clenching my fists, grinding my teeth, is this anger? Am I upset she got away? Am I upset that my perfect plan has hit a wall? What am I mad at? What… am I?

I cross my legs and put my left arm over the top of the bench toward the girl stuck in time. Scanning the barren desert, I slip into my unconsciousness as I now face many new questions. My conscious remains yet as I spot the diary. That's right! I had 37564 take 18782's diary. I reach out to grab it. Cassandra's diary, her final diary. I snap my fingers, summoning 37564's diary. I'll compare the two. Let's see where the entries diverge. This girl… how did she have a war with her other

selves? I shouldn't have let that happen. It was fun to watch though. Anyways, the entries should be consistent but… I can't check one without the other. I snap my fingers again, summoning the other diary. Nothing…I snap my fingers again! What?! Did… I lose it? My eyes shift from left to right… I lost it… Ah, what is WRONG with me? Did I seriously lose it?

I drop my hand from the top of the bench, it falls on top of a book sitting between myself and my guest. "AH! I guess I left it here! Oh, silly me! Getting worked up over nothing. Aha… ahahahaha… Ahh." Now let's see, I have to make sure all the entries line up between the two.

They both should've started on the same day, through the same event. 18782's looks good. Nothing out of place here. Oh my love, does it pain you to know I'm on the precipice of finally achieving my goal? What am I getting sentimental for? It's just as Cassiel said. The future, is made with our own hands. I will suffer it no longer, so I guess there isn't really a future anymore. Well… I'll just give 37564's a quick skim. The two should start the exactly same.

As my fingers crack the diary open, I'm welcomed to the first page. It's… huh? A single line? I open and close it over and over again, imagining that it's contents will change. What is this?

"Sorry Aion, but our Princess is in another castle!" I look up into the sky, feeling rather deflated. I sigh and shut the cover of the diary. I grip it in my right hand and throw it away as far as I can. A fake? Then… the real one…

I feel my eyes widen. I see the possibility at play here! They… but how?! Did they find 37564's diary? No… only other Cass' can find lost Cass diaries. Then how?! How did…Wait.

Think this through Aion. It's just as you said, nobody else could've found this. Then that leads to this being intentional. It was not a mistake, it was malicious. I look over at Cassandra, her face still frozen. Her eyes sealed shut, never to reopen.

"Did you… you did… didn't you? You still had hope? For her? For 18782? Ah, I suppose this is the second betrayal I've received today. Is this the feeling of despair? The feeling of having all your

hard work amount to nothing. Having your carefully laid out plan fail, right at the very end. Truly divine comedy."

This pain. This excruciating, insane pressure in my chest suffocates me. My heart is screaming out. The sound rings through my entire body. I feel tears running down my cheeks and my nose gets stuffier and stuffier. This is a disgusting feeling. For what reason do I have such a condition in my body that makes me behave so incompetently. It's sickening.

"Aha…aaaaaaaaa…ahahaha…ahahaahaahaha

LAUGHING REALLY IS THE BEST MEDICINE. THE SMILE ON MY FACE. I'M HAPPY! PEOPLE LAUGH WHEN THEY ARE HAPPY RIGHT?! SO LAUGH! LAUGH! LAUGH!" I sigh and take several deep breaths. Well, you're certainly in no position to be punished.

You're already gone. No, there is a way. I will kill 18782. You believe in her more than I? Despite destroying every… single… universe with me. You stopped at hers? Something about her is so p*owerful*, so *hopeful*, you quit at the very end to save her? I will find her. I will kill her. I will gaze into her eyes as I take her life back. Unbelievable, that I failed here at the end. Me? Fail? Unheard of!

"Take a break Aion."

"Take a break?! You're telling me to take a break?! Do you realise that I was in a great mood? And I was just 5 minutes away from ending it all? I don't need a break! I need to REMOVE Cassandra Watson from life! This existence… Look at you! Open your eyes! Idiot! IDIOT! YOU MORON. YOU PLEBEIAN! RUNNING AROUND IN THEIR MAZE! WHY DID YOU BETRAY ME? CASSANDRA! ANSWER ME!"

"C'mon Aion. Let's head over to the bar. We can talk about it more there."

My anger drains itself from my body. My breaths are short. My fists tightly clenching. I didn't notice until now. My nails pieced my skin; blood is running down my fingers. It drips down below,

bathing the sand in a royal coat of red.

"I know, I know, I know sweetie. Come over here with me. We'll work it out."

I open my hands up and attempt to heed the advice. I place my right hand on my forehead and massage it for a few moments. Is this actually doing anything? Whatever. Let's go to the bar. I snap the fingers on my left hand, opening a portal up to the bar. I wander inside it, leaving the desert and the events that transpired within it, behind. The bar opens up to a lobby. There's seating in front of the counter. There are a couple couches and a few chairs in the lounge. A mirror sits in front of them, staring back at the room. Making my way to the back side of the bar, I mix whatever I get my hands on and pour it into a glass. I don't care what's in it, I just need something to loosen up. I take a seat on the couch, cross my legs, and take a long, deep drink of the concoction. I hold my drink to the side as I stare into the mirror. Oh you. So… *perfect*. Truly is it unfair to the denizens of the universe that something as beautiful as I exists.

"Cassandra… Would you prefer the role of the pawn? Free from the burden of choice? That option no longer remains for you. We can't walk away with such ignorance. Your shackles have been removed. The experiment will go on."

"Aion, have I complimented you today?" She says, staring back at me. God, how unbelievably good do I look?

"No, you haven't… Guess I should get on that."

"Aion~ You look so good today~ Oh my god, you are so beautiful. Those flawless sapphire eyes, those eyelashes. Just perfect. Oh… that red on your forehead! It's a little different, but it still looks good on you! Let me get you a napkin or here… I'll put my finger up there and clean it up myself."

I set the glass down on the shoulder of the couch and raise my hand to my forehead. I try to rub the red off, although it's already dried up. "Well, I guess this calls for a shower! Let's go Aion!"

To the left of the mirror is a hallway. Down the corridor and to the right is the washroom. I hadn't

thought about it earlier, but that little… scuffle with Watson worked up a bit of a sweat. I enter the room and start running the water into the tub. I wash my face off at the vanity first, so I don't have to bathe in blood. I pull a washcloth from the cabinet behind me and dab it into the water. I take extra care to not let any of the water contact my skin while running. Don't want any extra water spilling or making a mess over my counter. Not really in a mood to clean anything up other than myself right now. I look into the mirror, dabbing my forehead a few times, getting the caked-on blood off of myself.

"My goodness Aion! You are simply divine! Aphrodite and Venus but common harlots compared to your beauty!"

"Why Aion! What a delightful compliment! I am certainly spoiled by you!"

"Of course, sweetheart~ You deserve to hear it! Let's climb into the tub and rejuvenate. Look good, feel good, you feel me hon?"

"Oh ho~ I think I will in a moment!"

I drop the now rustic flavoured wash cloth into the clothing hamper, my outfit will be joining it shortly. I turn towards my mirror as I pull down on the top of my dress. I wrap my arms around myself and close my eyes. Swinging back and forth in my own arms… It's ok Aion. These things happen. Treat! Your! Self! You've come back from worse! Take this time to relax, unwind. I remove the rest of my dress. How can I look back at her in the mirror? She's too good for me. She deserves someone who doesn't fail. Someone successful.

Bending down to the floor, I set my dress aside and stare down at my toes. Ah… my shoes are still on!? Why? Why? WHY? How did I leave my shoes on in the bathroom! Aion for fuck sake! Get these things off! I pull off the right, then the left and hold them together in my right hand.

Setting them outside the washroom door, I return within. Tripping up a little bit, I get a glimpse of myself in the mirror. I can't help but immediately look at my… I turn away from the mirror and

continue with removing my underwear, shying away from the view. I slide it down in an instant. Hah! I learned that from… from… her… Just get in the tub.

Dipping my toes into the water, I stare at myself as I enter. How graceful my movement is. Truly a master of my class. As my body is enveloped within the liquids grasp, I stare at the ceiling once again. This feeling. This disgusting feeling of failure. How did she do it? How did Cassandra do it? I mean, it doesn't really matter. I'll be able to take care of it later. She's still only human. I could go back at any time and finish her, but I think I deserve a moment. Honestly, I'm glad she vanished from my sight. Why couldn't she just be like the rest? Why didn't I just finish her like all the rest? It was just a momentary lapse in judgment that's all. I let my emotions take over. I admittedly wanted to hear her out, for curiosity's sake. It has been a long time since we were together but, nonetheless I have my own priorities and a job to do. I will maintain it now and forever. I've gotten used to the solitude at the End of Time anyways. There's only myself and my happiness to worry about. I have no desire to see Cassandra again at all in fact.

I raise my arms to sit on top of the sides of the bathtub, stretching my feet out, closing my eyes and yawn… I need to think…

"Ai…n….He….Ai…on….

Aio….i……Hey….Aion….

Aion! Wake up! Wake up! Wake up! Wake up! Wake up!" Someone is calling for me.

"WHA?!"

"C'mon Aion, you can't sleep all night AND day!"

"Ugh, I don't wanna get up. Go bother somebody else."

"A-I-O-N. I did bother someone else, in fact, I've bothered everyone else! We're going out together! Everyone's already outside."

"Oh my gosh. Why me?! You already have everyone else, Eris. Just let me sleep, tell everyone I

got sick."

"Can you even get sick Aion? Look, just come with us, it'll be fun! Gonna go shopping and have dinner!"

I roll over and stare at the wall, I am awake now, but I can't admit defeat like this.

"Ugh. Eris! Why me?"

"Let's go lazy butt! Get some sunlight! You need that vitamin D." She's almost screaming, you always do this when you get excited.

"Alright. Alright. How about this, I'll stop time and get a few more hours, then when I wake back up, time will resume, and then we can go out." I pull my blanket over my head, the warmth and comfort of my bed disincentives leaving it.

"We have prepared for that contingency Aion. In the event you selfishly take advantage of time, we brought Cassandra to drag you out. We also thought it'd be beneficial for her to get to know the Ministry members. Everyone really is here today!" I sit immediately upward in my bed, staring at Eris, my eyes wide surely open.

"Who? Who… are you asking? Could you say that again?" She stares at me like I'm crazy for asking that question. What did she say? I…

"Cassandra? You know… that girl who found your watch. Well, I guess it's her watch now, but you know that better than I do. She put this little heart on it, super adorable!" I lean back on my pillow and think. My watch… is now Cassandra's… She found it… somewhere… and I let her keep it?

"What's wrong? Did you realise some sort of super important time lord duty? Were you not supposed to let Cassandra have the watch?" Eris' tone is now more serious. Perhaps she thinks this is an important matter for the Ministry to discuss.

"No… no… it's nothing. I guess I just forgot. And it's not hers for the record, I'm just letting her

borrow it. She has the capability to naturally time travel. The watch just simplifies the process."

"I see, I see. Did you use it to practice or something?" She asks me quizzically.

"I suppose once upon a time, even I needed to practice controlling the flow of time. The watch will help Cassandra out too. I would be quite disappointed if she weren't able to learn it on her own one day, so I'll give her the training wheels. Maybe… one day she might…" I trail off, thinking of a future that doesn't exist. A bittersweet feeling… if I could just find a way to…

"Gold is definitely a better colour on her than you. Anyways, might you now get the heck out of bed and join us?" My thoughts quickly interrupted by Eris. This girl I swear…You just can't dislike her.

"Alright, fine… I'll get up. Now leave me be while I get ready. Absolutely no peaking!" Pointing my finger right at her.

"Of course! See you in a bit!"

Eris waves as she exits my room, her smile comforts me more than my bed. My chest feels warm. I feel like for the first time in a long time, I'm home. After getting prepared I gather my things, drop them in my purse and exit my room. I head down to the courtyard; everyone is ready and set to head out. Oh… she wasn't lying, Cassandra is here today. I guess there was some truth to her little threat earlier. The Ministry girls and Cassandra Watson all together. I'm not quite sure about how I feel about them being all together.

Ceres claps her hands together and tilts her head. "I'm so glad you found the time to join us Aion, I really didn't want to go have to go without you."

"Yeah, yeah, I bet that's why you sent Eris to get me rather than going yourself." I reply, trying to sound indifferent.

"Well… I thought Eris would've gotten the best result out of us, that's all." She ends her sentence with a smile.

I raise an eyebrow and stare at her for a moment but I can't be upset at Ceres. I know she meant well. I send my gaze across the other Ministry members, everybody is dressed impeccably well, even Cassandra is.

"Hey Cass, looks like you got some new threads. They're… interesting." I say. Honestly… thinking about it… gold does fit her better…

"O-oh thanks! Yeah, I wanted to get something that really fit what I was going for and this checked all the boxes. Look, my jacket even kinda looks like your dress!" Cassandra replies enthusiastically. I'm glad she found something that feels good.

"Hmm… trying to copy my perfect image huh? Of course my style would look fantastic on you. It's like my reflection dyed her hair black. However, what are you supposed to be? A doctor or something?" I ask curiously.

"Close! I'm a Detective! Just pretend I'm Holmes' assistant! Although, I'll be the one solving the mysteries this time around!"

"Glad to hear it Cass." I reply happily, I'm glad she's following the path of progress naturally.

"Alright ladies let's not dally any longer! It's *time* to get our shopping on!" Ever enthusiastically, Eris declares it and so it will be. Everyone follows her lead out, but I remain, calling for Cassandra's attention.

"I think I'd like to stop by the flower shop first. Hey Cassandra, what's your favourite flower?" Ceres asks my bubbly protege.

"My favourite flower? Hmm I'm not sure. Ones that are really colourful I guess." She responds.

"Colourful? Hmm there's a large amount of Heliotropes that can take various colours.Why, even roses can take a variety of colours. What do you think?" Ceres asks again.

"Well I'm sure every girl loves getting a rose but me? I'm not sure."

"I like Iris flowers. Something about them just appeals to me." I offer my own input.

“The Iris. That is a wonderful flower Aion. Great choice.” Ceres approves of my taste. Nice.

“Maybe I'd like an iris then.” Cassandra says quietly. Ceres smiles and claps her hands together.

“We most certainly can get a few then.” She says and then leaves, catching up to Eris.

“Hey Cass, just a second.” I inquire.

“What’s up Aion? I don’t think Eris will be too happy if you hold things up any longer.” She tells me out of concern.

“I think it’s impossible for Eris to be anything other than happy… maybe scared… but I’ll take the heat for it, don’t worry.”

“Hmm alright then, what did you want?”

“How are your travelling skills now? Have you gotten better?”

“I have! The watch makes things so simple! I can go back and forwards in time so much easier now.”

“That’s wonderful news! Just make sure you don’t do anything to upset the timeline. There is an order to everything, Cass.”

“I know that Aion, you think I’d just go back and mess with people for no reason?” I stare at her blankly, I have a feeling she would do something EXACTLY like that.

“What?! You’re thinking it aren’t you! Aren’t you!”

“I mean… kinda…yeah…”

“Aion! Ok, look, all I’ve done is go back sometimes and eat different kinds of food, that’s it. I swear.”

“Cass… You aren’t built for eras of the past; you are built for your own era. Don’t eat things from the past, got it?” I raise an eyebrow at her “What have you had so far?” I follow it up by shoot her a glare, hoping to show that these rules shouldn't be ignored.

“Uhh well… I had some bread in England from the middle of the 19th century last week…”

“Cass! What the hell? Bread made during that period was adulterated by sawdust, chalk, clay, and all sorts gross things! You’re gonna get sick eating things you have no knowledge about!”

She looks down at her shoes, hiding her face from me in silence. “Oh my god, you already did, didn’t you?”

She nods her head up and down like a little kid being punished. “My tummy hurt for 3 days…”

“You’re lucky it was only 3 days Cass! Be. Care. FUL. Got it? “

“Yeah… sorry…”

“Alright… well let’s catch up with the others now shall we?”

“H-hey Aion.”

“Yeah?”

"I miss this. How long has it been, since we just got to talk like this?"

Cassandra turns away from me and steps towards the centre of the courtyard. I begin to feel uneasy about her movements. Why do I feel this way? I know everything that will happen here, I’ve seen it before. This is… ugh… yours is not the only one who’s tummy can hurt Cass…

“When are you going to wake up?

“Huh?”

“I said, when are you going to wake up? Stop hiding.”

“Who are you talking to Cass?”

Slowly she starts walking towards me. My heart sinks into my stomach and I take a step back. I reach behind myself to feel for something, anything, but there’s nothing…

“Shit!” Sweat starts sinking down my from my forehead, my eyes shift left and right in a panic. This foreboding feeling is choking me. What’s going on here? My breaths get shorter and shorter until Cass stands right before me. I clamp up and hold my breath. I hold myself in place and shut my eyes, trying to lock out the world around me.

“You can’t run away, not anymore Aion.”

My arms release and flail in front of me, trying to get Cass out of the way. Suddenly, I hear the sound of splashing water and my eyes peel open.

“WHAT?! Oh…” I’m returned to the empty scene in my bathroom. I look around the blank canvas, trying to decide if I’ve actually woken up or not. My soggy body certainly feels real but just in case… I raise my right hand to my face and pinch my cheek.

“Ow…” Yeah… I’m back. I put my hand on the back of my head and rub it. A dream... Tomorrow is going to be a long day.

The Roar of Hate/3

I keep my eyes trained forward, staring in disbelief. It worked… I glance around the hall we've arrived in. I guess this is our base of operations. It'll be pretty hard for Aion track us down here. Unless… My eyes shift towards Cassiel, I can't let my guard down yet.

"What do you think Cass? Aren't you glad I showed up when I did?" Cassie says with her face beaming. She must be quite proud of getting me out of that situation.

"Cassiel! It's a surprise to be sure. I'm grateful of course but… I… I think you showing up there was a bit too convenient!" I tell her what my instincts are telling me. I'm not sure what happened there, it was all so sudden. I also have to consider that this is Aion trying to trick me and make me the prey once more. I was just in her… Cosmic Egg thing. Who's to say this isn't an elaborate set up. A perfect recreation by a perfect stage master.

"Quick Cassie! Prove to me you're not actually an elaborate illusion designed by Aion!" I spurt out my words, finger pointed at her. If she's not an illusion I've made the largest moron out of myself.

"Uhm… well I… Ahem… I'm one of the Seven Archangels!" She spurts out an answer. This information is correct but Aion would know.

"Not good enough! More proof! Better proof!" I shout out. If I'm making a fool of myself, I'd sure like to someone to prove me wrong sooner rather than later Cassiel!

"Uh I uh… I like spaghetti and spicy fried chicken. I mix them together and cover it in gravy instead of meatballs and tomato sauce!" She cries out. Alright I'm weirding her out. I don't think Aion would tolerate my shenanigans for this long but… just to be sure!

"How many times have you and Eris divorced then remarried!" I fire out another question, eager

to hear the answer. I don't know the answer myself… but neither should Aion!

"Divorced and remarried? I mean it's… We don't do that. And who's even recording the attempts anymore! I…"

"Bzzz! Wrong Answer! You're a fake aren't you. AREN'T YOU?! You're name is way too similar to mine! It's way too close to mine. You're going down!" I Can't risk it! Aion is too cunning a foe to let my guard down around!

"Cass, please stop harassing your saviour. She might not accept the job next time." A soft voice enters the room and forces my mind and body to calm down. I look around for the speaker and find her walking up the hall toward us. Just as she is and always was!

"Althea! It's you. Oh my god! It's so good to see you! I missed you so much ImissedeveryonesomuchIwassoscaredItwashorribleAltheayouhavenoideahowcloseIwastodyingit wasseriouslytheworstthingIhaveeverfeltinmylife." My words pouring out of my mouth faster than the tears from my eyes. With an extremely relieved sigh, I feel like I'm finally safe.

"Cass. Cass. CASS! Please! Talk, slower. You're with friends now." Althea says, I sense a slight air of annoyance in her voice, but it's her! Being around her again… Ah she has such a pleasant aura.

"Cassie, thank you for bringing her back. Would you mind fetching Daphne, let her know that Cass has returned to us?" Althea confidently says to Cassiel. I guess there's quite a bit she has discovered on her own to have orchestrated my rescue.

"Of course. I'll head out and look for her. But before that…" Cassiel motions over to Althea and they both approach me! They open their arms and squish me in a big comfy hug.

"It's good to have you back, Cass." Cassie says.

"It is Cass, we missed you a lot." Althea says after Cassiel. I smile and return their hugs as best I can. It goes without saying that we're all a little unique. Supernatural in one way or another. I'm a

time traveller. Although, I can't travel into the future or stay in the past for too long. But along my travels I've met some special people.

“It’s good to be back guys.” I say with tears gently rolling down my face once more.

We all pull away after a few tender moments and smile at each other. Cassiel nods her head then excuses herself, magically floating away and out of the hall. Cassiel is an angel, literally. She's an all around bright and warm girl. Like she mentioned, she’s an Archangel. A pretty big deal. A guardian of the Seventh Palace, whatever that means. She likes hanging around with us because I ran into her while travelling back in time one day. Well, maybe she's really just keeping an eye on us but we get along very well. I also have the feeling she's addicted to the conveniences of the modern world. And soda. She loves soda.

“Lo and behold, I visited your office in Brooklyn and found you uniquely absent. I’m sure you have many questions Cass, but rest first. We’ll discuss things after you get some warm food in your tummy and a good night’s sleep!” Althea expresses her concern. I’m really grateful for whatever had happened here. They must’ve known there was some sort of risk to help me. She shuts the old looking tome in her hands. Is that the grimoire Cassie mentioned? She lets go of it and it magically floats behind her. A curious purple aura inexplicably radiates off of the cover. I feel like the back of my head is starting to hurt, as if a flame up is being held against it.

“Cass? Cass, did you listen to what I just said?” She asks me, snapping me back into reality. Althea is a witch. Not a wicked witch but not a benevolent witch either. She wears a witches hat and robes. I guess she just likes them. She doesn't live in the woods, luring children into her home to eat. She lives at the bottom of the sea in Atlantis and doesn't ever eat anything. At least not for hunger's sake. She never told me exactly where she came from but I know she's not human. Not that any of the others here are human but she's a special case. She's formless. A real monster type. Floats around with an magical air. In fact, I think the robes are what keep the real Althea hidden away. She only

appears in a human form to look like us. I'm sure she could appear as any creature if she wanted to.

Truth be told, I'm not very familiar with the type of creature she is. But she's on our side. That's good enough for me. We didn't meet through any unconventional means, I just ran into her one day. Literally. I was walking to school and bumped into a woman and we both fell down. Then as I picked myself up I was blindsided by a punch from her shadow and fell back down. I still remember her cackling at me while helping me get up. That very shadow that now takes the form of the her familiar, the fairie Cat Sith. Ok, that is actually very unconventional.

“No, sorry, I was thinking. Lost in thought I suppose!” I reply.

“Do you remember the way to your room?” I try to recall. It’s been a while since I’ve been to Atlantis. That book is calling me. I feel, drawn to it. It's so...

“Cass? Hello? Earth to Cass!”

“Oh! Uh… I… kinda?” I say very weakly. I don’t know why. I guess I don’t want to look foolish in front of Althea. Probably too late for that.

“It’s been some time since we’ve visited. I suppose it might be dangerous to go alone so… take this with you.” Althea turns around and starts whispering something. A dark black mass begins forming on the floor underneath her. It starts to morph into some sort of four legged animal and purple fumes start floating up to the top of the hall. I hold my hand out like she's going to give me something to hold.

Spinning around in a circle, she slaps my right hand away and smiles. “Here, a Cat Sith! He’ll lead you to your room and keep guard at your door to keep you safe and sound tonight.” She says with her adorable smile stretching across her face. Her fingers shape into peace signs and she winks at me. I feel like I just saw something weird happen. The Cat Sith pops out from underneath Althea’s dress. Speak of the devil.

“NYAA!” It shouts it's catlike cry.

“Fufu, there are other Cat Sith around who are taking care of various things here. If you need something from them or from me, let any of them know. They should have dropped off some food in your study by now. Just don’t watch them while they work, ok?” I take a moment to think about what Althea had said. A good nights rest… Does that mean it's night time? Don’t watch them work? Huh?

“Hey Althea, do you know what time it is by any chance?” I inquire of her.

“Hmm, I think it’s time to get a watch Cass! Ufufufu.” She teasingly remarks

“Hey! I have one already!” I quickly snap back.

“Then consider checking it!” Althea says. Keeping her smile, she turns away from me and walks down the hall. The Cat Sith makes its way towards me. “Nyah” A charismatic response, it looks like it's ready to lead me back to my room. I realise I’m still holding my watch in my right hand; I finally start to relax my grip around it. Althea must’ve thought I was messing with her. I stare at the face of it, the arms aren’t moving. I guess it’s frozen in time now. Aion did say she had removed the time crystal from it. This is bad! No! No negativity now! I’m back, safe and sound! Focus on the positive! Let’s go to my room.

I follow the Cat Sith and gaze out of the windows in the hall. Atlantis… this place is definitely the ultimate hiding spot. It's an area outside of time and space. It can’t be tracked down by any normal means. Fortunately, a friend of ours has a trick to finding it. That's a benefit of being a former Atlantean citizen. Well, citizen is putting it lightly. More like royalty. She's innately connected with the city because it's her city now. I wonder where she is. She didn't show up with Cassie. I think her and I share the closest bond out of everybody else. It's like we exist on the same wavelength. It's different from Aion though. Aion and I...

The Cat Sith makes some cute noises in place. I look down and see it trying to jump up at the doorknob, attempting to open the door. We made it to my room so fast.

“Let me get the door little buddy!” I say enthusiastically. Finally, a chance to rest and relax. Everything is where it’s supposed to be. My home away from home, or I guess, my office away from the office. It’s spotless, the Cat Sith must have come in earlier and tidied it up. Man, if the Cat Sith were my personal assistants, I’d be a super good detective. The best there ever was! Ah to dream… I look at my desk and see a few plates covered by domes. Let’s see what Head Chef Sith created today.

I lift the stainless-steel dome off of the plates and look at the foods. Spaghetti…with fried chicken and gravy. Hehehe, I can guess who requested tonight's meal. Let’s see what else. A salad and of course for dessert, some cookies. I seat myself and motion to the Cat Sith.

“Alright buddy, for being my valiant guide and protector. Here is your reward!” I pass the cookie down to the Cat Sith, it lets out an excited “NYAA.” It takes the cookie and starts its dinner. Alright tonight's plans are, dinner then a shower, then bed.

It might appear unladylike, but who cares! I’m scarfing this down! Noodle, chicken, salad, everything. I devour it all like starving gremlin. My plate empties and my stomach fills. I get up and walk around my office, stretching my legs. I guess all this is really just me coping with my situation. I'm shocked at how things ended earlier. Aion, what do I even know about you? Were you faking it the whole time? Did you hate living that much? Did you…

“Nyaa!” My train of thought is thoroughly destroyed by my little guide.

“Ah… ehehehe. Hey buddy! Did you finish your cookie?”

“NYA!”

“Aha, I’ll take that as a yes! Hmm, how about this. I’ll give you the rest of the cookies if you keep guard while I shower, ok?” I shoot the Cat Sith a wink and smile.

“Nyaa NYAA!”

“Alright, here!” I take the plate of cookies and set it down next to the Cat Sith, it nods repeatedly

at me and... I think it's trying to salute me. Safe to say we have a deal. I wander over to my closet and open it up. Various articles and styles of clothing are inside, but I just need my pyjamas for now. How did I end up with so many coats? Man, that's a lot of coats. I guess I was sort of obsessed with looking cool like Aion, while trying to have a style of my own. My coats stand out like her dresses. I gather the pyjamas and underwear; my mind once again weighed down by thoughts of Aion.

A door at the back of my room leads to the bathroom. I head inside, giving the little Cat Sith a wave goodbye. I start the shower up and begin undressing. Sand falls out of my outfit onto the floor. I hope nobody minds the mess… Well, we ARE in Atlantis, sand around here wouldn't be too unusual. I tear off my jacket and toss it to a corner of the room.

I loosen my tie, unzip my skirt and lift my blouse up from underneath it. I grip my skirt and my underwear and pull them down together. If Aion was here she'd be going on about how beautiful she is and how lucky I am to have the privilege of bathing with her. God she'd get so annoying sometimes. I unbutton my blouse next, pulling it back behind my arms, I toss it over to my jacket with the tie still around the neck. I gaze at myself in the mirror. My chest and back are covered with scars. A testament to the work I had done while investigating. Battle scars! They're cool! Aion never thought they were. Tsch… She'd always have her hands on me, turning back time to make the wounds never happen. She'd say that she didn't want me ruining my flawless skin. Man… that's just... so like her. I was so glad when I told her I didn't want to hide my flaws. She got so mad at me went off on me for what felt like an eternity. That's a time I never want to travel back to. Heh…

I remove my bra, stacking it together with my skirt and undies, throwing them all together at my jacket. I set my gaze back on the mirror, looking at myself. I walk towards the vanity and stare into my eyes. These deep sapphire eyes. This haircut. I'm more like Aion than I had thought. I mean, I look good too, don't I? I'm cute! CUTE! Plus I'm pretty sure I beat her in the chest department! I wiggle my bottom and giggle under my breath. Heh… what am I doing… I enter the shower and

slide the door closed. Washing myself, an overwhelming number of emotions run through me. I can't get her out of my head. I rise the shampoo out of my hair and place the conditioner in while washing my body. After getting from head to tippy toes clean, I let the water rinse me off. I lay my head against the wall underneath the shower head and begin to cry.

Aion, you are so much to me. My mentor, my teacher, my… I slide down, sitting inside the shower, wrapping my arms around my legs and cry into my thighs. Ah! I hate this! I hate it! I hate it so much! What was all that time we spent together Aion? Why did things end up like this? Why? Why? WHY? I squeeze my legs tighter, hoping it will make the aching in my chest lessen. I pull myself up after a moment of silence. I rinse my face under the water to hide the streaks of tears running down my face from somebody that will never see them. I take a deep breath to relax. Ok, time for bed.

I creek the bathroom door open, scanning the room for the Cat Sith. Doesn't seem like it's in the room at the moment. The plate is empty… it must've gone outside to patrol the area. On my bed are a couple of towels. I feel kind of embarrassed to see that. It knew I didn't have any, so it brought me some. I skip over to my bed and pick them up. Oh, is this is a note? On top of the towel here? I reach for it and read it.

"You might need these STINKY!" Hehe that girl. I swear. I guess that means Daphne was here. I dry my body with one towel and my hair with the other. I take a seat at my desk, stacking the plates up and setting them to the side. I spin the chair around, looking at my room. Gosh, it's been a while since I've been here. I'm pretty grateful it somebody cleaned the place up. I'm really not in the mood to sit in a musky old study. I skim over various books and notes I have on my desk. So many adventures, so many mysteries! I pick myself up, jump into my pyjamas and then into my bed.

Sneaking my way underneath the covers, I'm reminded of how comfortable a bed feels. It's grip robs me of my freedom, but I don't mind. Goodness, what a day. This… actually isn't too different

from a normal day. The only difference is that this time the perpetrator is my best friend. My eyes feel heavy, I'm not going to fight this feeling. When you're tired you sleep! I close my eyes and drift off into dream land.

Reflections Ten Thousand Meters Deep/4

"Hey you… What are you longingly staring into the sunset for? Waiting for the son of House Montague to whisk you away from this dream?"

"Oh, Aion! Well you know, just thinking about that last job. I'm not sure I should've done something that disruptive to the world."

"You? Worried about something? Now I've seen everything."

"I mean… I know Morrigan and Ceres went to sort it out… but c'mon Aion. It was a freaking dragon!"

"Yeah… yeah... it was a dragon."

"And I SHOT IT! WITH A GUN! THE BULLETS I USED WERE COMBINED WITH THAT SPECIAL MIXTURE I PRODUCED TO TAKE OUT OUR MOST DANGEROUS FOES!"

"You don't need to raise your voice. Look, it was supposed to happen. This is what's laid out in the timeline. She was supposed to be shot by you and land specifically on that building."

"Yeah I know… " I keep my eyes trained on the horizon of the city from our townhouse.

"On the bright side, you finally got a chance to visit Tokyo. And now I'm giving you a vacation here. Isn't that a great reward for one simple job?"

I turn around and look at Aion, leaning my arms back and placing my elbows on the deck fencing. I'd be a liar if I didn't say she looks beautiful in a kimono.

"What's got you all dressed up?" I ask her, trying to not sound too obvious about it.

"Oh, this? Well you know… when in Japan, do as the Japanese." She replies, shifting her eyes shyly away. The light of the sunset is shining on her just right. She's drop dead gorgeous. I feel like

I should be bowing to her out of respect for her beauty!

“Oh ho! And what about you Cassandra? If you weren’t standing by me you might look pretty fine yourself in a kimono.” She says in a teasing tone.

“What’s this? Flattery from the Goddess of Time herself? I am honoured that you sully your gaze with my lowly mortal body.” I reply to her in kind. I look at her hair, her eyes, her kimono, her everything. This girl is seriously cute!

“C'mon let's head inside. It’s getting cold now that the sun is setting.” She slides the balcony door open and struts back into the room.

“Be right there!” I shout at her. I glance back at the city; it feels so surreal. Aion is actually really sweet when she’s not obsessing over work. I’m not sure how she’d receive that compliment though, so I’ll keep it to myself.

I walk back inside and head over to the living room. On the table I spy a couple cups of ramen with chopsticks sitting on top of them. Cute, is this her doing? Did she prepare these? I look around, it doesn’t seem like Aion is in the room. Where did she wander off to?

“Aion! What’s this? Did you make these?” I shout out.

“Well Cass, why don’t you use that brain of yours and think about it for a second huh?” She replies with a shout of her own. She didn’t NEED to make that snarky comment, I just want to try getting a conversation started…

“Just eat it blockhead.” Aion wanders into the room, I detect a hint of annoyance in her voice. I stare at her as she makes her way to the table. The top of her kimono is open! Oh god, I shouldn’t look. How bold can she be? Bare skin! Scandalous!

“What? Am I so beautiful you’ve found yourself at a loss of words?”

“I didn’t expect to uh… see you so relaxed.” I turn towards the side of the table and grab one of the cups. I didn’t ever think I’d see her with her guard down like this.

“It’s miso. That’s what the kanji on the cup says.” Aion grabs her cup and takes a seat on the floor opposite of me.

“Oh wow, I didn’t know you knew Japanese.” I say what I can, hoping I didn’t make anything awkward.

“I mean… I’ve got a lot of free time. The labours of Ceres, Morrigan and many others are what uniquely make this world. Not to mention the children that live in it. It would be negligent of me to not learn about them.” She says pridefully, I guess she’s proud to see her friends do all this.

“Do you know any Japanese, Cass? I know you’re busy solving various incidents but... maybe you study in your free time?”

“Uh… heh… no…” I look down, pouting a little bit. “I just work all the time…I never really think about relaxing. One case closes another shows up. Just a new issue every day, what can ya do? Plus you assign me the work! You know how much time I have!”

“Well, I guess that makes this vacation all the more special right? Ahem… so how’s the uh… how are… the ramen… is the ramen? Ugh…” She fumbled her words… That’s a side of Aion I haven’t seen yet! She's getting flustered! What a cute side.

“It’s good! I don’t usually get to eat this. It’s just not really on my mind very often. Where’d you get it?” I realise I’m saying it’s good before even having tried it. I awkwardly open my mouth while smiling and look away.

“Yeah it was in one of the cabinets in the kitchen. I thought it’d be better to eat something that we can prepare here. Best to not go outside while all the commotion is still going on.”

“Y-yeah! Good call!” I look back at the ramen and pick up the chopsticks. I dig them into the noodles and pull them up best I can. I bite into them and let whatever isn’t in my mouth drop back into the cup.

“Cass? What the hell? You don’t eat ramen like that!”

“Huh? Uh I mean… who cares ahahaha.”

“Cass… You know, the Japanese don’t believe non-natives know the proper way to eat noodles. Let me teach you~” She… she’s rather enthusiastic about these noodles. Well, I’ll follow her lead I guess.

Aion tucks the hair on her left side behind her ear and moves down towards the ramen. With chopsticks in her left hand, she dips them into the cup and pulls some noodles up. Her lips protrude outwards as they meet the chopsticks. She starts slurping the noodles up and they slide into her mouth. I had never thought about doing it like that. She finishes slurping and turns towards me.

“So, you’re supposed to slurp them up. By doing this you accomplish two things. One, you cool the noodles off. Two, it enhances the flavour by taking in the broth and the noodles together. It’s rather genius.”

“Ah…is…that it?”

“Look, that’s just the important stuff! Don’t give me any back talk!”

“Alright, alright." I put my hands up, hoping I didn't offender her or something. "I guess it’s just a little strange to care so much about proper noodle eating etiquette.”

“Cass, you must understand the culture of the place and time period you are in. To ignore them would be to ignore Ceres' and Morrigan’s work. Mankind coexists with nature and together they form a bond that binds them to one another. It’s all they know. Humans are born into the system and live their lives by following traditions that have gone on for thousands of years. And in the end, they die, experiencing it the same as one another. That is humanity.”

“This is a bit too existential for me Aion. I think it’s easier to just… be in the here and now.” Aion raises an eyebrow at me, firing a particularly powerful gaze.

“Well then, how about learning to eat ramen here and now so I don’t look like I raised a lazy student.” She snaps at me.

“Hahaha. Alright fine let's eat properly.” We both eat our noodles, the slurping noises fill the living room up with a jovial atmosphere. I really didn't think that much went into eating this stuff. I’ve never thought about how much Aion knows about humans. It's a nice change of pace from the usual Aion. Do this. Solve that. Find this. It's nice getting a moment to just exist. To just be with each other. I can feel my face start to get hot. I don't think it’s the noodles doing this.

Aion finishes her cup first and takes it into the kitchen. I can hear some water pouring from the faucet. She shuts it off and the silence returns.

Ring Ring Ring

“Oh! Aion your phone is ringing. Want me to get it.” I shout, Aion is still in the kitchen.

“No, I’ll be there in a sec.” She yells back. I blink and freak out! Gah! There she is, standing in front of me. Why did that scare me? She’s the time lord not the horror lord.

She doesn’t need any sort of outside help to modify the flow of time. As expected of Aion, complete and flawless control. Maybe one day I can learn how to control time like that.

She paces around the room as she speaks. “Hello? Ah yeah hi. So she can change forms? Ok. I’m sure the shot was not harmful, it’s a tranquilliser. Uh huh. It is unusual, but isn’t unusual your forte? I see. Ok. I’m glad to hear that. Thank you for following up but I’ll pass it on. No, don't count on it next time either.” Aion sets her phone down, smiling.

“Who was that just now?” I walk over to her.

“Oh. Just some guy who I take work requests from sometimes. He's technically a part of The Ministry. I suppose”

“The Ministry? Uh… what’s that.” I speak up after slurping more noodles. Not the most graceful response.

“The Ministry of Interuniversal Affairs. Hehe… it’s like… a governing agency.”

“A governing agency? Like they’re all old men who tell people what to do?”

“It's more like them being a group that specialises in securing and protecting otherwise lost, dangerous, paranormal, supernatural, and other mysterious beings that find their way into our universe. It’s basically a panel run by some of the gods that like to enjoy Earthly pleasures.”

“And they wanted the dragon because?”

“Because it was a damn dragon, Cassandra. They need to handle it.”

“They do all that? Regular ol’ people like you and me? Well, not like us but you know what I mean.”

“They have a very special staff. And they also have some of those special staff members call in for help, as we were today. Sometimes it’s me, sometimes it’s Morrigan or Eris, depends on the character that arrives.”

“So that dragon earlier… wasn’t supposed to be here?”

“Cass, it was a DRAGON. Do you THINK it was supposed to be here?”

“Ah… hehe right. So the Ministry took her in and will do what exactly?”

“I don’t know the specifics, but they’ll probably have her fit into society somehow. They always do.”

“Oh… So why did they call you to do it? What were you gonna do to her?"

“Me?! Ah well I had you do it so…”

“So, what were you gonna do if I wasn’t here?” I press Aion on the situation, it’s a little fun teasing her.

“Cass, I’d really rather not…”

“Awww c’mon Aion, for your ol’ pal Cass.”

Aion sighs heavily, staring into my eyes then turning around and walking away. “I was going to kill her Cass. Clip her wings and watch her fall to the Earth, letting The Ministry clean up the mess.”

“Oh… oh… Sorry… Aion.” I reply sombrely.

“Don’t be. I said this is how the timeline was supposed to flow. You were supposed to do it. You saved her life.” Aion clears her throat and looks back for a moment. “Well, I’m gonna wash up, if you need anything just holler.” Aion vanishes into the darkness of the hall. I hear a door creek open then shut.

I stare down into the hall. Aion’s words weigh heavy on my mind. I saved a life. For the first time, I feel the burden of that word. In another timeline, Aion kills that dragon. The value of life, the traditions, the customs of ordinary people all through time. Is this what Aion was trying to tell me earlier?

I go off on my own for the rest of the evening, waiting for Aion to finish her shower so I can take one. After cleaning my mess up, I return to the living room, searching for Aion. She is surprisingly difficult to find. The hide and sneak master! Or she left…

Ding

OH! This device, the cell phone. It’s from the future. She gave it me for quick communication. A message. It’s from Aion! Let’s see here… “一期一会” Japanese?

Uh… okay? You know I can’t read that. Shaking my head, I copy the text and search for it with the cell phones dictionary feature. “Once in a lifetime occurrence” I guess today has been full of those. I’ve come to see a whole different Aion today. Well, she must be around then right? Maybe she’s trying to teach me more Japanese customs.

“Aion! Hey! Where are you?” I think I’ve done far too much shouting today. “Aion?”

I turn towards the window and check outside. Suddenly, I start feeling light-headed. I shake my head and turn away from it. Light-headed? Time is splitting… Then, there must be a divergence here. Where does the timeline split? Hmm earlier Aion said everything today is supposed to happen.

So that must mean whatever happens will follow continuity regardless. It must depend on my choice on how to get there… Aion… did you want me to choose this too?

I scratch my bottom and wander around the house, searching for the second spot of divergence. There might be more than two. Oh you are SO awful, making me do everything today. I pout and begin my search around various rooms of the house until I reach Aion's room. I sense divergence here; the light headed feeling hits me again. So it's somewhere outside and in her room. Hmm which route should I take…? They both reach the same end point but I'm greedy. I want all the Aion I can get. I'm sure she can fit both in for me.

Once In a Lifetime/5*

I put my coat on and take an umbrella with me. A light snow is falling over Tokyo. I wander the streets, searching for Aion. It's quiet, really quiet. I didn't know cities could be this quiet. I follow long empty streets, looking for the girl who changed my entire world. I know she's out here but just where did she wander off to? A department store? A restaurant? No, she said we were supposed to lay low. She wouldn't wander into any places like that. But she shouldn't anywhere in the first place.

I take a turn, walking up a hill. The snow is starting to pile up on the ground now. I turn around and gaze over at the city. The subtle tones of light that shine at night reflect off of the snow and into the sky. It makes the world look gorgeous. It's like the sun is still out but not at the same time. So calm and quiet, this is the most peaceful world I've ever been in. Maybe I can get a bit closer to the guardrail over on the edge of the road. The snow over the street is completely intact, not a single soul has been around for a while. No footsteps, no car trails, nothing. I look up the road and notice someone standing in place, staring out at the city too. Ah! That's gotta be her! I walk up the hill to meet the figure and sure enough, it's Aion.

"Evening, my perfect Goddess." I call out.

She remains still for a few moments before turning her head towards me. I look down to her feet, there aren't any prints around her. Has she been standing here for awhile?

"Hello, my little detective. Come here often? Ufufu~" She playfully laughs.

I stare at her for a few moments. She looks like Aion, sounds like Aion, but is she really Aion? She's been like this all day. I'm so not used to this behaviour; I might go into shock! I clear my

throat and smile at her, “Well, I got your message. I was wondering what it was about. Once in a lifetime or something like that?”

“That is correct. Ichi-go ichi-e. Do you know why I sent you that?” She asks, her voice so calm and cool. I can hear my heart beat within my chest. She looks perfect. She’s perfection, in the literal sense. Only in an abnormal situation would you ever get to see her like this. I look at Aion's kimono, it's so flawless. It's actually incredible! The snow isn't landing on her. Its landing around her. That’s a nifty spell, can’t believe I’m out here using an umbrella like regular schmo. Well, at least she covered her chest back up out here but I wonder if the cold even affects her like it does me.

“Cass?” She calls out. I was so lost in her beauty I had completely forgotten about her question.

“Ah right, why you sent that to me. I guess to cherish every moment of my life?” I say halfheartedly. I can’t really think about something on that deep a level right after just learning about it.

“Not a bad answer. I’ll give you credit for that. Good job.” She says in her buttery smooth voice. It slides into my ears and infects my brain. What the heck man, I’m completely smitten!

“Did you know Cass, that it actually rarely snows in Tokyo. Conditions in the atmosphere typically don’t allow it, but once in a while, things line up just right. The temperature has to remain low enough for the snow to reach the surface of the city and atmospheric pressure must be such that moist air is brought into the city from the south to cool the upper air in the sky above Tokyo. That lesson is free by the way.”

I stare at Aion, finding myself rather speechless at the situation. I look at the city for a bit and think. What the actual hell is happening right now?

“Wow, that’s pretty amazing Aion. Did you learn that from Ceres? Or maybe you secretly love meteorology. Might have to look that info up myself!” I lightly tease. I am actually impressed that she knew that.

“Well like the saying goes, variety is the spice of life~” Aion smiles at me and walks towards me, her sandals print deep into the freshly fallen snow. The crunch it makes echoes into the night sky, imprinting the scene into my memory as Aion takes my right hand into her left.

“Cass, if you could wish for one thing, what would it be?”

“Anything I want?”

“Anything.”

I free my hand from Aion, putting it on my chin and to think. Anything I want with a single wish huh? I haven’t really ever thought about that. A lot of money would be pretty nice but… I don’t really need money. A lot of yummy food? No that would waste the wish! Oh! I drop my hand and slam it down into the palm of my other hand. I know!

“If I could wish for any one thing, I would wish for a peaceful life. If I’m at peace, then I know that all the cases in the world are solved and there’s no more reason for me to time travel. No more investigations. Just me kicking my feet back on a beach and sipping on some coconut juice.”

“Ahaha, that’s a pretty innocent wish to have. To wish for a peaceful life, not a peaceful world? Interesting…” Aion trails off at the end.

“Well you know, if I ask for a peaceful world, it throws things out of balance right? There needs to be equal amounts of good and bad. That’s what makes us, us, right? But, if I make my life peaceful, then as a byproduct, the world will be peaceful without affecting that balance!” I raise my chin high, proud of my prolific little idea.

“Ahaha, well said Cass. I guess you have the idea correct, more or less. I’m actually for this wish, I like it. It wouldn’t exactly work like that, but perhaps one day, you can find that peace. I’ll be cheering you on the whole way.” Smiling, Aion turns back towards the view of the city. “Now let’s go back home.”

“Why were you out here in the first place Aion?” I ask her a question before we start the journey

back.

“To experience this moment in time with you, Cassandra.” She replies as the wind gently pushes into her. Her hair flips to the side and she bashfully turns her head away. That's what it is. She grips my heart with her words and they caress me in a warm embrace. My heart flutters at the idea and I feel myself unabashedly smiling at her. That's it. That's what it is. This is a feeling of comfort you can't discover on your own. This feeling takes two people to create. It's like we've caught up. We've reunited. I feel whole. The final part of me has been recovered and she's right in front of me. I love her. I love this woman.

Aion walks past me and heads over to the sidewalk and down the hill. I eagerly follow her with butterflies floating about in my stomach.

“Hey Cass… What would you say to joining The Ministry?”

“Oh, that agency thing?” I reply with a question. I honestly had forgotten about it as we make our way down the hill together.

“Yeah. Might be a good fit for you.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Well you've already met some of the other members. Ceres, Eris and Cordelia. You'll be put on a team with them to do jobs like the ones we do together. It's mostly a formality thing.”

“A team? Of other special characters? I’m flattered but I’m not… very special Aion…”

“You are to me, Cassandra.”

My heart bursts with feelings of love, I've fallen so hard for her. I've been like this for awhile but now that I think about it, I had already fallen and hard. I can't imagine my life without Aion. I pinch my cheek with my left hand to ensure I’ve been awake the whole time. Join up with The Ministry huh? I guess it couldn’t hurt to offer my investigative services to them!

As Stars Cross/6*

Cassandra, do you feel it too? The stirring in your heart when we're around one another? I stay outside on the deck after returning home with her. I keep staring over the horizon that Cass was staring at earlier. What does she see that I don't? This view that I've seen a thousand times, how do you see the world differently from me?

"Aion? Are you in here?" I hear Cass shout inside, she's outside my bedroom door! Oh I'm nervous, my chest gets tight, my breaths become shorter. Why are you so nervous? Aion you've done this before. Just like every other time. Just ask her.

I freeze time and head inside. Yeah there she is, standing in front of my door. I walk into my room and enter. Let her in and chat. That's it. It's really easy Aion. Remember Ceres' advice, just talk to her. Not as a Goddess, but as her friend. No titles. Just Cass and I. I open my mouth to shout back to her but I chicken out at the very last second. I can't! I'm too embarrassed. I don't know what to do! I let time resume and sit in silence for a few moments.

Knock Knock Knock

"Aion? Are you ok?" She's right there Aion! You can't keep her waiting all day! Ok… OK! I'll stop time again and tell her! It'll warm me up to this. I freeze time again. I get up to open the door and whisper into her ear, "Come inside detective." I run back into my room and sit on my bed. Oh my god that sounds so stupid, why did I say that? I should've said something cooler. No, maybe I should turn time back and retry that. No, just stick with it. Oh why does this choice anguish me so? I let time resume, staying committed to my actions. Now to wait for her answer.

"Alright, I'm opening the door." She replied, Cass replied. Oh gods! I can't. I can't! I stare at the door watching the knob turn. No! I freeze time again. I get up and leave the room, walking down the

hall, staring at Cass from afar. I'm just, I can't. I'm such a mess inside. I'm afraid of revealing my feelings to her. I don't want to hurt the relationship we've built. I don't want to her to suffer this feeling when I… when she becomes…

Creak

Huh?! She! She moved the door! She moved in frozen time?! You've improved Cass. I slowly sneak my way back to my room. Breathe Aion. Just breathe. Ok. You'll know if she does or doesn't want to, she'll let you know. Have confidence!

I walk inside and look at Cass. She smiles at me and begins to open her mouth. I place my left index finger against my mouth. "Shh." I move towards her and push her down onto my bed. She stays silent. I slither down and wrap myself around her in a tender embrace. I pull her arms over her head and lock her hands into mine. I stare into her eyes, and she stares into mine. My heart is beating one hundred times a second. I lower my face to meet her and close my eyes. I split her lips apart, claiming them for myself. She tightens her grip on my hands. I tighten mine in return. The warm air from her nose gently runs across my upper lip and tickles me. I smile. She smiles back. We share an eternal moment, frozen in time. I pull my face away; strings of mixed saliva extend from between us.

I open my eyes back up, my heart throbbing, can she hear the passion of my beat? Cass keeps her eyes closed, but she turns her head to the right, extending her neck out. I oblige her and move my head down, assaulting her with small kisses upon her neck. From top to bottom, kiss after kiss. I pull my tongue out and press it against the spot of my final kiss. I run it over her neck, stopping at her chin. I move back to the same spot once more and bite her. I wrap my lips over as best I can, sealing my grip and sucking on her. "Aion!" Cass moans. My head gets light, all I can think about is how much I want to hear her give herself up to me. I want to hear her moan.

I let go of her hands, tugging at the top of her kimono. I start opening it up as we separate from

the kiss. She assists me in tearing her top open and letting it fall to her sides. Biting down on the lower right side of her lip, she starts to open my top up. I turn my head to the side and let her open it. She giggles. I giggle in return. I push my face into hers a third time, looking to claim her lips again. I wrap my arms around her, reaching back for the hooks that hide her chest away. Top, then bottom. I can feel the weight drop. She's free now. Cass places her hands on my face, pushing me back, ending our kiss. Pulling herself up and away.

She starts opens her kimono up more and takes off her underwear. I place my hands on my body, loosening up the belt that wrapped me up as her present. She crawls over to me, her butt pointed upward and outward. She rips off the belts around me and leaves me partly bare. She puts her mouth up to my chest and starts kissing me. Her soft lips press down my boobs, my stomach and land right on top of my panties. Another rush hits me as she presses her lips down on my most hidden area. She pushes. I pull. My kimono falls off and I lay back onto the bed with my legs stuck together. Her hands slyly slip underneath my sensitive area. She pulls. I push. My underwear is in her hands. We gather all the clothing up and toss it all to the side.

I brush my body into hers, laying her down this time. I wrap my lips around her right nipple. My tongue running circles around her areola, my teeth gently nibble on her button. "Ah." A faint sound escapes Cass, she's trying hard to keep silent. That won't do. I press down onto my teeth, gripping her nipple with more pressure. "Oh sh-shit… Aion! Not that hard!" She places her hands on my head and starts petting me. Her hands run through my hair, I feel even closer to her now.

"If that was too hard… I suppose I can give you a little break."

I lift my mouth away from her chest and start heading south. I set kisses down her bosoms and tummy until I run into her lightly furred kitty and grin. This will be the second pair of lips I'll be splitting tonight Cass~. Slowly, I spread her open with two of my fingers.

Grool drips out of the bottom and onto my bed sheets. A bright tone of pink sears itself into my

memories.

“D-don’t look! Don’t look directly at it! It’s embarrassing Aion!!!” I lift off of her pussy and insert my left index finger into my mouth, soaking in my spit. I make sure she watches.

“Just sit back and relax, let me take care of you for once.” I insert my finger inside of her. Cass wraps me in her warmth and the sensation shoots throughout my body. My heart flutters at the feeling. We're becoming one. From head to toe, I have goosebumps. I gently start pushing it in deeper, slowly wiggling it around inside.

“Hngh. P-please… take care of m-me then”

I keep a steady rhythm and decide to start eating her out simultaneously. I push my mouth onto the roof of her pussy. My lips wrap around her most delicate part with my free arm constricting around her bubbly booty. I sneak my tongue inside, rubbing at her hidden bean. I feel her love juices pour out of her and onto my hand. Her breaths become more and more laboured between her quiet moans.

“Aion… p-please… a bit more… don’t s-stop…” Cass says with a shaky, sultry voice. She grabs my hair and pulls on my head; it makes me happy. I purse my lips, starting to suck on her clit. As quick as she grabbed my hair she lets go and starts pushing my head into her crotch. Her panting gets louder and louder. I tighten my grip around her fluffy bottom, now greedily stealing handfuls of her big ass. She begins to rub her hips into my face, very intent on making me finish the meal I started.

“A-Aion! You… you’re… I’m… I’m… gonna cum!” I keep my lips tight, sucking on her most sensitive spot. My finger keeps its pace.

“Cum Cass! Let it out!”

“Kyaa. Hah. Hah. Aion… my…. my god…” Cass lets herself go, the labours of my work splash onto my face and chest. I lift my lips off of her, pulling my finger out. I lift my face away from her

and stare. I can feel my hair weigh down on my me as I look into her eyes. I'm in love with her. She stares back, looking into mine. I raise my damp finger to her face and push it into her mouth.

“Am I your God?” I can feel her laughing as her tongue whisks around my finger. She opens her mouth; I can see the moist warm air escape her as my finger is freed.

“Hehe…” A short and simple laugh is all she manages now, stretching her body over my bed. I lay down next to her and stare at the ceiling, thinking.

“This all happened while time was frozen, thus it wasn’t recorded.”

“Ah… I see… probably for the best right?”

“That’s for you to say. I can’t tell you whether something you had done, did or didn’t, have purpose.”

“That was a… a rather interesting thing we did there.”

“Yeah… yeah it was.”

“I uh… ahem… you know…” Cass awkwardly tries to force some conversation. She has been doing this all day.

I stare at her, surprisingly finding myself rather speechless at the situation. I look at the ceiling again for a bit and think. What the actual hell is happening right now? I clear my throat and start to speak, “You don’t need to say anything. We can just lay here and cuddle up. Or you can freak out in your head alone. I don’t mind either option .” I lightly tease. I’m not in a better situation myself since my head was in her crotch a minute ago. But I want to let her know it’s ok to feel how she’s feeling right now.

“Why… why did you… we… I mean… did…ugh.” Cass pulls herself up to me, cozying up underneath my left arm against my boobs. I look down at her and pet her head.

“I guess… why… why me, Aion?” Cass says quietly.

“Why you huh… Well… I wanted to… I wanted to do this with you… Do I need any other

reason?" I reply while turning my head away, trying to hide my face. Not that it will help with all the pounding my heart is doing in her ear right now.

"W-with me?!" She asks.

"With you." I respond.

"I… I don't know what to say…"

"Sometimes you don't need to say anything… feels like I'm running around in circle now…"

"Well you know… time is a flat circle!"

I stare at her in disbelief, what a lame joke. "I'm going to resume time now. Refrain from using anymore awful jokes please. I don't want them on the record"

"Right… ok…"

"You dork." I whisper, snapping my fingers and letting time resume. The universe continues its schedule.

"Can we just… stay like this tonight Aion? Just the two of us?"

"Sure… although... I would like to wash myself again. I didn't think you were…" I say jokingly point at myself drenched in her love.

"Oh… I didn't know I was either." Cass replies in an embarrassed way. She buries her head away from me.

"Oh man… I uh… hey how about that shower huh?" I avoid the topic completely; I think I'm dying of embarrassment on her behalf.

"Right! Yes! Let's!" Cass jumps out of bed and heads to the washroom. I follow her after grabbing a few towels. Cass gets the shower started and we enter together. We wash each other, hiding the evidence of our passion.

"Hey, Aion?"

"Yeah?"

Cass shifts her eyes left to right…what is she…

“Round two?”

A Wish to Decide the Future/7

"So, how exactly do I reach this dead timeline?" I ask Althea in a less confident voice than I should've. I'm a little concerned I don't have the ability or courage to do so anymore.

"Ufufufu. Aren't you the time traveller? Well thanks to the other…you… Daphne and I had found a very hidden text, locked away within the Atlantis library. I will transport you across space time the same way I sent Cassie to you. I can create a point of travel to almost anywhere in any timeline, provided a few conditions are met. One, being that I need to possess an item of the person I am looking for. Two, I need an immense amount of mana to cast the spell."

"Oh! The other Cass's diary!" I exclaim out, hope sinks its teeth back into my voice.

"Correct, her timely offer to assist us had cost her life. I think it's best not to squander the opportunity she has presented us."

"Right, so how did you guys find me? Did I leave something of mine behind for you?" Althea stares at me funny. Did I say something wrong?

"You mean aside from your office full of your possessions?"

"Ah… right…"

"Ufufu. Well actually, remember when you jokingly sold me your soul? You were trying to get out of cleaning that train you and Aion left behind in Manila?"

I feel my face get hot and my gaze shift to the side, "…Yeah…" I say faintly.

"Well…" Althea lets a giggle slide under her breath.

"You've had my soul the entire time since then? Souls are actually real?!"

Althea raises her arms and folds them across her chest. "In a manner, yes. But! I will eventually return it! And besides, it's better I still have it anyways since it allows me a pure and undisturbed

link to you.”

I’m not going to think too hard about what I just heard. What the heck! Have I been running around without a soul for the past year?

"Wait a second Althea, if the other Cass gave you guys info on where that book was..."

“Yes. Aion more than likely also has knowledge of this and possibly other ancient texts.” I get interrupted by her before being able to finish.

"Is that something we should be worried about?"

"Is it something to be worried about Cass? Did anything seem different about Aion? Your story didn't seem to show something off about her as far as I could tell." As far as you could tell?

"The Cosmic Egg… you don't think that's too much of an issue? Her World or whatever it is.” I laugh nervously. Am I misremembering things? No, it's just a lot to take it.

"Hmm, I think there is some sort of flaw in it. She didn't notice you nor Cassiel arrive right? You know her better than us Cass, what do you think?” Althea says.

She’s right… Aion might've been lying. She wasn’t consistent with what she has said and she’s done. Why didn’t she notice us? How bizarre.

“Well, as a reminder Cassandra, the timeline you will be heading to has already ended. You can’t travel forward in time there at all, only backward from the point where time had ended.”

“Timeline 37564… Wait, why only back?” I ask cautiously.

“Because the timeline has no future. It is no more than a specific still on a roll of film. I hypothesise that if you were to travel forward, you would simply move straight to the end of time with Aion again.”

“Alright, I’ll keep that in mind then.”

“Not just in mind! You cannot, I repeat, CAN NOT, go forward. It's going to take me several days to gather the necessary mana required to cast the spell. If you end up back at the end of time

with Aion, nobody will be able to reach you. Promise me, you won't go forward."

"Yeah… Althea. I promise. Detective's honour!" I raise my right hand like I'm making an oath with Althea.

"I technically can't go forwards anyways." So if I travel forward in a timeline that has been eliminated… No… Aion said she had summoned me… but… if she had summoned me then why were we standing in the dark in complete silence… This doesn't add up, clearly she would've expected me… I've never been summoned by Aion to the End of Time before... maybe... she's lying to me? Was she hoping to take advantage of the situation? Maybe she just recognised what happened quicker than I did? Every answer I get opens up ten more questions…

"Cass? You ok?" Althea reaches out to me and nudges my left shoulder.

"Oh… Yeah! Yeah I'm okay! I just have a lot on my mind." I keep my thoughts to myself. Althea doesn't need more weighing down on her mind.

She smiles at me and pinches my cheek. "Cass…this is going to be your most dangerous case yet. Nobody has ever recorded anything from a failed timeline because a timeline has never failed before. You are going deep into uncharted territory and it's possible that you will garner Aion's attention. Steel yourself. Prepare for the journey to save our… to save all timelines. I will let you know when I've finalised the preparations for travel."

"Right! Thanks Althea!" I smile at her and we part ways for the time being. I head back to my room. This investigation, it may very well be my last one. Something like this has never been recorded before... so not even the Cosmic Beasts like Althea have experienced something like this. But I need to find out what happened at the End of Time with Aion. Heh, if the consequences of failure weren't so dire, I'd probably have a lot of fun doing this. Well… it's still pretty fun. As I reach my door I spy an exceptionally charismatic Cat Sith.

"NYA," It squeaks out at me.

“Hey buddy! How have the patrols been? I’ll try to sneak you a cookie back next time ok!” It hits me with a very excited “NYAA~” I enter my room and sit down at my desk. I spend my time reading through old notes from previous investigations. Though they’re not really helpful. I won’t find anything in my records. I’d need to get my hands on Aion’s records and that’s unlikely. I push them to the side and pick up a book. My door creeks open and someone makes themselves comfortable on my bed. I've been neglectful and not spoken to her yet and I'm about to leave again. I clear my throat, hoping my words will carry confidence.

“I’m not afraid of going, in fact, it’s really the opposite. I’m excited! I’m really excited! This is the chance of a lifetime, to go boldly where no one has gone before! You know me, I’m a big gambler. Risk taking is my middle name. I mean like, I’m basically already done with the investigation. I just need to like, solve the crime and capture the culprit.”

“Yeah but you better come back! Plus what's a lifetime to a time traveller anyways you dummy!”

“C’mon Daphne! You know me! I always come back!”

“You almost didn’t last time Detective!”

“Well… those were just unforeseen circumstances. It’ll be different this time! Just you watch!”

“How exactly is anything unforeseen to a time traveller dingbus?”

“That’s not even a word Daph!”

“You’re not even a word!”

“What does that even mean?!” Daphne picks herself off of my bed and walks towards me at my desk.

“I just, you know, I was scared you weren’t gonna come back. I spent days searching with Althea inside the library’s most forbidden section. We were looking for something, anything that could’ve led us to you. That other Cass is just as lazy as you! Zero hints! Just "It's in a forbidden part of Atlantis' library." Real helpful Watson!” I get up and walk up to Daph. I give her a big hug.

“I’m sorry. I… I don’t know what happened. I really don’t know. I just blinked and ended up at the End of Time. Everything lately has been so fragmented… I can hardly say what's real and what isn't. My mind is so hazy, I feel like I can't even count on my memories anymore.” I pause and hold onto Daphne tightly, trying to keep my big girl face on for her but it’s getting hard.

“We’re… I’m… especially grateful to that other Cass who showed up to help find you. I thought maybe you were setting up a prank at first, but Althea had noticed her soul was different. She immediately knew it was a different Cass and brought her here to explain what was going on. I’m sure Althea has told you the rest of that story.” Daphne grips me back; I can feel her shaking in place.

“Yeah… yeah…wait. Althea didn’t mention anything about her soul. What are you talking about Daphne?” I let go of her and stare curiously at her.

“She didn’t? Maybe I wasn’t supposed to mention that…” Daph trails off, bonking her head and sticking out her tongue on the side of her mouth.

“Why wouldn’t she want me to know that… wait… so if that Cass’s soul is different from mine… and Althea has my soul… then… I’ve been protected by Althea the whole time. That Cass… she never made that deal with her Althea!”

“Deal?” Daphne looks at me curiously.

“Oh, ehehe, don’t worry about it! The important thing is that somehow… Althea has protected me the entire time I’ve been away. That also means I have a pretty good reference of time to visit in the other timeline!”

“Well, that’s a good thing right? These are all good things right?”

“I hope it is Daphne.” I feel like Althea withholding that information from me is suspicious to say the least… but I still trust her! We’re friends to the end!

“So what now?” She asks me

"I dunno. Wait for Althea to complete her preparations I guess."

"…Wanna make out or something?"

"Sure ehehehehe." We both start laughing and Daph heads towards my door.

"What were you reading? What book is that?" I turn back to my desk and remember I was about to crack it open pass the time by reading.

"The Iliad. I'm sure you're familiar but I just enjoy the story."

"Ah, studying Odysseus so you can win a war huh? Well, I'll leave you with your book then nerd. I'll see you tomorrow!" She says with one foot outside the door.

"I'm not a nerd! And, yeah…thanks for coming Daph."

"Anytime smelly!" I look down at the faerie below me, rubbing on my leg.

"Let's get some cookies! Follow me Cat Sith!" Daphne shouts at the Cat. I stare at the two walking away, listening to her voice get more and more quiet as she travels down the hall. For all life to have ended in other timelines… all that life to vanish from existence… I have to fix this! I won't let Aion take this from me! I go back to my desk to plan a course of action. My eagerness makes the wait feel like an eternity. It's won't be Odysseus' plan but I'm sure I can think of something! I take my time and prepare for the trip to the other timeline.

Walking out of the shower, I take a seat at my desk. Let me recap this in my head. The past few days flew by. I was going back and forth between my office and the library, looking for any information that can come to my aid. But, the reality of it is, is that Aion and I are on different planes of existence all together. Aion is a God. There's no beating that. Maybe I *should* go the Odysseus route. I might not necessarily need to beat her, I just need to *trick* her.

A knock comes from my door. I get up and walk over, opening it for my guest.

"Yo Cass, just wanted to stop by before you left." Cassie and Daphne are together holding some clothing. That's curious.

“Hello ladies, what's going on? What's that in your hands?” I walk to the side of the door and hold my arm out, inviting them in.

“New outfit!” Daphne explodes. Way too much energy.

“New outfit? For me? Why?”

“You're not going back in that old, gross outfit you had before. This is a new one. For a new you!” A new me? What is she talking about?

“We all thought that this time, you should go in your own image, not Aion's. Since your old outfit is based on her, we found a new one you might like. Why don't you try it on?” Cassie hands me a large coat and a nice looking pair of dress pants. Daph hands me a white button up shirt and a blue tie.

“C'mon bozo, go try it on hurry up!” Daphne pushes me into the bathroom and shuts the door. Goodness, if I don't come back I'm not going to be as upset about it now! My hair is still wet dude. I oblige their request and put the new threads on. They look pretty good. Feels weird, wearing pants again. I was so used to skirts but you know, this is a nice change of pace. An outfit for me. Oh, I left my watch in the other jacket. I pick it up off the floor and take the watch out of its pocket. I tie the chain up and wear it like a necklace. I have to get to the bottom of this. All of this.

“Tada!” I throw up some peace signs and let them see how I look as I exit the bathroom.

“Cass, oh my god you look great!” Cassie exclaims.

“Yeah, really. No more old timey-wimey detective, you're a new girl!” Daph beams at me, seems she's really proud of this.

“You think so?” I laugh a little with them and strut around. I feel like I'm important. This is a nice feeling.

“Oh definitely! You looked like you were Aion's doll or something before. The skirt was so silly like, you're not a school girl anymore! Now you are a refined and mature, Cassandra Watson!” Daph

calls for a Cat Sith, it wanders over from the hall with a camera. She must've planned that ahead of time.

“Ok let's get a photo of us together, before you die.” She sticks her tongue out at me as the cameraman… cameracat… monster thing… gets into position. Daphne jumps on my back and a peace sign shoots out from her extended hand. Cassie crouches next to me and does the same. Finally, I put my own peace sign out and close my left eye. The shutter snaps and we get our silly silhouettes down on film. Now it really feels like I'm going away. Cassie takes a pin off of my desk and punctures the photo onto my wall of evidence trails.

“There Cass. A memory of us forever ingrained in film but you can only see it again if you come back. Got it?” I nod at Cassie and Daph approaches me.

“Here Watson, you never know what Aion might do to you so, give her hell for me. For all of us.” She hands me a light brown bag. I take it from her and shift it around in my hands.

“Daph, is this...”

“Oh it is. I trust you'll know when to use it.” I slide it into my new coat's pocket and laugh under my breath. Oh, I hope I'll find an opportunity to use it.

“C'mon, lets get out of this stuffy office and find Althea!” Daphne charges out of the room and Cassie slowly follows behind her. I look back at my office. It’s not stuffy, it's comfy. I hope I'll be back soon. I exit last, shutting the door behind me and catch up to the other two. We make our way back to where I had appeared when Cassiel had saved me. There’s a large, glowing, magical circle on the floor. I think that means Althea is ready to get things started. No wonder these two came by.

"Alright Cass, if you are at peace with your decision, let's begin. I will gift you 72 hours worth of time to spend in the dead timeline. You must stop the other Cass from forming that deal with Aion. When the 72 hours are up, you will immediately be sent back here. Where we will eagerly be awaiting your return in a hopefully "safer" universe."

"72 hours? Cassiel was under your spell for like 5 minutes!"

"I severely underestimated how much mana it took to send someone to the End of Time. Even for someone like me, it's a considerable challenge. You and Aion don't know how easy you have it!" Althea replies to me with a hint of annoyance in her voice. I didn't mean to doubt her or anything.

“Ok, so I have three days to stop the end of everything? I can only go backwards in time and going forward would send me to the end of time. Do I have this right so far?"

"Correct! You can call it three days but I think saying the time value in hours is easier to manage. Up to you. Anyways, as I said before, do not, under any circumstances, go forward! It took me a week of almost pure meditation to gather all this mana up and I'm going to need a week of rest to recover. At most, I'll be willing to gather mana for an additional day for your trip. I'm not sure how much time that would give you... maybe three or so extra hours. Don't check my math!"

"So 3 extra hours..."

"Keep in mind, we will have no idea whether you’ll need the extra time or not so don't do anything you would normally do Cass."

"Waddaya mean? I'm a professional!" I whine back at her, does she think I'm that dumb?

"Cass. Not this time, we can't risk it." Althea's voice is quiet… I know what she means… I know she's right.

"Well then… lets get this mission started! Have you said your goodbyes?" She resumes speaking.

“Yeah... I saw everyone after waking up." I realise that my hands are shaking… How long have they been shaking? Yeah… alright I'm nervous… But I'm hopeful! I can do this! I go back and fix things all the time!

“Alright… hopefully it wasn't the final goodbye to everyone! We still have lots of adventures to go on, right?" Althea smiles warmly at me. I've gotta fix things. I will fix things!

"Of course! When this is all over we can gather everyone and eat and laugh and sing together

over a successful mission! I'd like a photo too you know!" I smile at her and look back at Daph and Cassie. They're waving at me. I can tell Daph is holding back from crying. Silly goof, you don't need to hide something like that.

"Step into the circle Cass. I'm going to start the ritual." Althea picks up the other Cass's diary. I never got to look inside it. Maybe that's for the best. The burden of that knowledge might make me doubt myself. I guess it just rolls off of Althea. She's probably seen some things in her time. I step into the ritual circle and stand in place. I tighten my coat around my back and look down at my watch hanging over my chest… Although my watch doesn't work… You know what! I don't need that thing anyways! I can move through time just fine! I hope…

“Ready, Althea! Send me back!" Althea moves in front me. Her gentle smile slowly fades off of her face. She nods and begins to recite her...magic...chant?

"I hold the silver key. Come forth from nothingness and open the lock… Oh Father, my God. Moving beyond the sleep of roses, the realm of dreams, we arrive at the final gate!" The circle below me lights up, just like the one from before at the End of Time. No going back now! I feel oddly tranquil. I never imagined that something like this would be so calming. I start to lift up off of the floor, my clothing also lifts up. I guess that would've been embarrassing if I was still in the skirt. I blink and open my eyes up to a new world.

With Passion and Purpose/8

I look around the "new" environment I've arrived in. I guess being direct is the best way huh Althea? Unfortunately, it seems like I'm out at the moment. My old Brooklyn office is empty, save for an intruder from across time and space. Hmm I guess I should try and see what time exactly I've been sent to. No wait, preserve the scene Cass! You can't investigate if you go around messing with everything! Look around, does it look like someone has been in recently? Where is Cassandra? The door, has it been opened recently? Is the air stagnant? Is dust sitting on the desk? The date or something like that laying out in the open would be nice.

Carefully, I take a few steps around the office, searching for signs of life. The air is kinda gross… and the desk is covered in a fine layer of dust. I think it's safe to say the door hasn't been opened in a while, so I've not been visited by anybody recently. A blessing and a curse. I'm going to have to investigate things very carefully to not disturb the peace this room. I see a few folders on my desk. I *should* recognise them. Hmm case file…#-0008 "Odyssey"…#-1138 "Britanniae"… #-1607 "New World ARDOR #-0810…" she's been around that's for sure. I recognise some the names but the file numbers are different from mine. I wonder, which one is she currently on? Has she left anything behind? I open up the drawers in her desk, hoping to find a clue, a hint, something that will point me in the right direction.

Let's see… scribbles… junk… trash… damn what a mess Cass! Clean this up sometime! I'm suddenly reminded of the work the Cat Sith did in my study. I'll be better about it too. I briefly insert my hands into my coat pockets… still there… Anyways let's see where I'm at. 0 notes. 0 hints. 1 Cass but not the Cass I need. I leave the desk and wander towards the door. Ah wait, I

shouldn't open it up. If there isn't a clue for me here I need to just leave things be. I can go back in time a bit to test the waters. I'll find something eventually. Now that I think about it, how long has it been since I arrived? I wasn't keeping track of time. Pouting isn't going to get you anything Cass, just continue the investigation.

Hmm, I don't think she's made that deal with Althea or even met the Ministry girls yet. Were those cases ones I worked on shortly after that Tokyo trip? I think that's the time frame at least. I don't see any notes on that case with the dragon. If only I had my diary. Oh wait, this Cass' diary should be here somewhere. I search around the room, trying to disturb as little as I can. The shelves, my desk, the floor, nowhere to be found! Damn it! Did she lose it? No, she might've taken it with her. Then she might actually be in Tokyo right now! Aion should be there with her too! If the timelines match up… and they should… Ok… I'm going to assume that I'm in Tokyo at the moment with Aion. But that doesn't really solve much. When does Aion propose her plan to this Cass? When did she find the time…

I scratch the back of my head, I'm lost. I know at the very least the deal wasn't made after meeting the girls. Logically, it's impossible. Althea has my soul, but the Althea here doesn't have hers. Did Aion tell her as soon as they met? No, I don't think Aion would have laid that on her after first meeting her, doesn't make any sense. Where did she have enough time to lay out this plan to the other Cassandra? What cases, what time? Wait… did she? Did she?! Think this through Cass! Why did she point out that everything was supposed to happen that day in Tokyo? What was significant enough for her to mention that?

I drop to the floor in disbelief. A vacation… where everything that was supposed to happen, happened. Did she need to make sure of something? The way she said it. She didn't follow through with the events for that day! She… That's why she KEPT VANISHING! She was leaving the timeline! She was…she…

My heart drops… my head is light…this…this feeling…I hate it…she was…the whole…time…I can't think straight… FUCK!

"It seems you didn't receive all of her memories. That's a real shame isn't it?" I turn around… I'm familiar with this feeling of dread. Yeah… this is where she was going… to meet me here. My blood freezes, I'm scared. I walked right into her trap. Heh… she's the Goddess of Time, of course she'd know I'm here. I bite into my tongue. Keep your shit together Cass, don't show her your fear, she wants to know she's in control of the situation. Just clear your throat and speak normally. I clench my fists as tight as they'll clench, don't shake, don't show emotion, face her with determination.

"Hey… What are you doing here?"

"You didn't know where to go back to, so you just guessed huh? Quite the lucky guess! I already knew that of course but… you didn't, did you?" She's taunting you, trying to get a rise out of you. Don't say anything else yet. Just analyse the situation. She can't be gone for too long; she eventually has to meet with the other me again at her house. What can I do in this brief period of time then? Jump back? She'd just follow me. Would I even discover something going back? Aion is aware that I know the time period the deal is in made now but there has to be something, anything, an inconsistency somewhere. If I wasn't so horrified I'd be able to think better.

"Cat got your tongue, Cass? Awfully quiet. Or maybe you're just so entranced by my perfection. My flawlessly executed plan all coming together, and you're realising the hopelessness of your endeavour to try and stop it." This *bitch!* This smug bitch. She never lets an opportunity to praise herself escape her grasp. Ok, that's my angle for now. If I pretend to submit, it might get me the time I need. Just butter her up, she won't say no to hearing a compliment.

"Oh Aion, you ARE a Goddess after all! How could I even hope to outsmart someone who can see the future?"

"I know, it's wonderful isn't it? Something just feels good about being… *perfect*."

"You know what else Aion, that nonsensical hubris you have. Always flaunting it around. Who did you get that from I wonder…"

"What are you getting at Cass? Feeling a little jealous perhaps?"

"Heh, jealous? I don't know what I'm feeling at the moment to be honest."

"Well… you won't have to feel it for too much longer. So go on, be a *good* girl and run on back home to your other mythical characters and wait for me to fix things, ok?" Aion is smiling, it's a gentle smile. Maybe she does truly believe she's righteousness. Maybe she truly does believe she is saving us. I, however am not letting this delusion of grandeur end MY life.

"If you're interested in further chatting, keep hanging out. I've gotta go back and finalise some things." She winks at me and vanishes into the air. God she's so frustrating.

Alright, that did get a bit more time for myself. So I guess that pretty much confirms my theory. She has to pay attention to the other me in Tokyo to tell that version of me her plan. Is that really right? No, that doesn't make sense. She's leaving Tokyo to come here and stop me? No? What is she doing? Actually, a better question is what am I doing right now? Forget what Aion is doing, Aion can do anything she wants. I can't! I've been side tracked. I came here to find out what I was doing, not Aion. I've been thinking wrong about this. Was that her goal? To throw me off of the trail? Is that why she showed up? C'mon detective, don't let her get the better of you. Alright, alright. There is an inconsistency here. What is it? Memories. Why did she bring up memories? I didn't receive them all? Then she must know something about what I saw, or thought I saw at the End of Time. That's the only place I have ever had that happen to me.

Was I trying to tell myself something? Wait Cass, this office. Her office, this whole room is a clue! No, not just a clue! This whole office is the answer! That's why it's so filthy, so untouched! She hasn't come back! She learns about the plan at the End of Time! She never returns to the office

after that! Those files! That's why they're labelled differently! Those weren't investigations, those are timelines! She's visited those timelines! Those timelines! OKAY! So she's with me in Tokyo right now, keeping that timeline consistent. This Cass already received her mission from Aion. Roughly three, no she'd be on the fourth right now. Right? Why did she bring their files though. Maybe it wasn't her. Aion could've done it. Alright detective, things are clearing up. How much more time do I have before Aion returns? Probably not much. What do I do with this knowledge? Was that the first or second time she vanished? I have no way of knowing, just guesses. It could've been at any point during the day. If I'm lucky, it was the final time before night. When it became night we… we… Are you really Aion? Are you really lying to me right now? Sending me sweet nothings for my love while you actively plot my death? Our deaths?

I can only stare silently at the wall for a few moments, it's empty compared to mine. No photos of my friends, none of my computer equipment, just a plain ol' boring room. It's sad. Maybe there's a 2nd Aion, her good half, and she's sealed away at the End of Time. Could I deal with a plot development like that this late into the story? Aion is all encompassing, the Goddess of Time, she wouldn't need another version of herself running around. One is already too many! She's not back yet, maybe I did luck out but, I still don't know what to do. Even if I do go back, Aion would know I did. I'm only afforded this time because she HAS to be there in the other timeline with me. I don't think I have the time to think of another opportunity like this so I'm just gonna stay here. Everything on that day is supposed to happen huh?

So what happens if I do something that isn't supposed to happen, Aion? Well, I guess there's not much point to preserving the scene anymore, she… nobody will ever return to this office. Heh, it's kinda bittersweet. I'm the final visitor. Alright well, lets at least take a look at these files. These one go first huh. No, wait didn't she mention what the first timeline to go is. Oh, I'm a moron! This timeline ENDED. That was the point of the whole getting here! Man… so much to keep track of.

This sucks without my diary. So what are these files then? I open up “Odyssey” and skim through it. Ah… more like… battle plans I guess. Specific triggers are laid out through various timelines… “Britanniae”…yeah. Locations you would go to tip the balance between chaos and order. Something on this large a scale across this many timelines would need something extraordinary. Wait, but why would she need multiple triggers if one timeline failing is the ultimate trigger? Yet another layer to the crime. Well, she’s had plenty of time to plan out.

Every step forward is two steps back. I continue to search around the room, looking for additional hints or clues but I come up short. Nothing here, just these files. Why just these files? What is the point? Are they red herrings? Is this to distract me from the real evidence? My head hurts. I reach behind myself and stretch. I should assume I’ve spent considerable time here and Aion could be arriving at any moment. Well, her showing up might be for the best right now. I’m at a dead end. These memories, these files, this office, what am I missing? What haven’t I seen yet?

Actually, there is something I haven’t seen yet but I promised…

I zone out, simply daydreaming, thinking about things here and there. I think I’ve had a good life… but I’d still like to experience more. There are so many adventures to go on. So many people to meet and sights to see. And I want to do them with my friends. I want to laugh more, I want to eat more, I want to smile more, I want to cry more! I still want to live! This dark musky room, it used to be full of so much life! So much fun! She’ll never experience these things again. The very least I can do to repay her is to make sure I carry on her legacy. I suppose we have our own pride as Detective Cassandra Watson.

The damning sound of snapping fingers returns. “Miss me Cassandra?” There she is… standing right in front of me. Quite literally snapping me out of my trance.

“Aion. Do you need to snap your fingers or?”

“Hmm? Oh no. I just like the feeling, the experience y’know?” Her reply as cool as ice. Not a

hint of doubt or regret in her words.

“That’s cool. You snap your fingers and I...” I take hold of my time keeper. I grip it with my left hand. “I prefer my watch!”

“Your watch? That broken pair of training wheels? You think that somehow compares to me? I am perfection…”

“Yeah yeah yeah, perfect this perfect that, been there done that. Any new lines Aion?”

“Ah…gwah… ha?” I’ve got her! I hope she falls for this. I pull up watch with my left hand. Time to perform the bluff to conquer all other bluffs!

“I know you’ve seen them Aion, our dreams.”

“Dreams? Our dreams? Ok I’ll humour you. You think I do something as worthless as dream? I don’t dream Cassandra. I create! I shape reality as I see fit! Surely having seen the End of Time, you realise that all of my so called “dreams” have occurred.”

I stay silent. I can’t imagine why she did this. But there’s a part of me that, that wants to believe I can fix it. Like I fix everything else. I have to at least save face, there’s a chance I do change things. I can only hope.

“Th-That’s what you think, but I’m not a constant! I’m a variable!” I raise my voice, I need to be serious!

“You are here by my design Cassandra! I trained you! I gave you the watch! I sent you on all those investigations! I built you up and moulded you to be my most perfect creation. There is nothing I did not prepare for!”

I’m at a loss of words. What she’s saying… yeah… it’s probably all true. Aion was the one that exposed me as a trickster to the people I would help, she taught me about the flow of time, she gave me her watch, she sent me on investigations to practice my skills. She, I, we fell in love. Was that by design too Aion? I have no rebuttal, I’m here in a dead timeline arguing with the evilest ex of all

time. But now I can try to mislead her. Deceive the deceiver. She doesn't care about the watch at all. In that case, maybe Daph's gift will do something. Yeah, that might be enough to let me slip through this timeline away from her. Alright, worth a shot Cass!

“You see them, just like I do. They haunt you, just like they do me. Showing you times that have long since passed of us spending time together.”Aion remains silent, staring intently at me.

“You know it! I know it! Why do you lie to yourself, Aion!”

“Oh Cass… Do you really think I’m going to let you weasel your way out of this situation like you did at the End of Time. I was clearly too kind to you back then. There will be no extra information for you to pull out of me. The investigation is closed, thank you for your service. Time to die!” Exasperated, Aion pulls her sword out and swings at me. Oh, this is bad. What do I do? There’s only one thing for me to do. Now! My right-hand digs into my right pocket, unwrapping Daphne's gift. I smirk, this idiot. I think I’m actually about to pull this off.

“Take this Aion! Pocket sand! HA!” I throw it at Aion’s face, hoping to dull her perfect vision for a few moments. Brilliant Watson!

“Argh! What the fuck?! Did you just throw fucking sand at me?!” She hollers out. Her right arm extends out towards me, the blade aiming straight for my head. I move out of the way as fast as I can and pull my watch up. I close my eyes and pray it works.

“Time is Mine. Freeze!” I shout at the top of my lungs, raising my left arm out and facing my palm out towards Aion. I definitely have her attention. She counters with her own time freeze and we match, deadlocked in our magical showdown. The incredible power of a God is pressing down on me, suffocating me. I hold my position with everything I have and still feel her overwhelm me. My head is being pushed down by her force and my eyes are shutting. I can feel myself being frozen in place but I can't let this happen. I don't allow it. So much depends on me. I feel my entire being forcibly pushing back in time, being reset as if I were the very watch in my hands. But for a moment

in time, a split second of a split second, I feel something bright. Something that flips a switch within me and my body reanimates, snapping me back into battle. Aion's head is high, the cruel gaze of a powerful God stares down at me and her eyes glow with power. Her fearsome, scowling face begins to budge as I push my head back up. Not this time Aion! I can't let this happen! Her face slowly, mechanically, moves downwards, her eyes shut. Her overbearing will begins to fade away.

Sure enough, she's frozen! "Holy SHIT!" Her sword pierces right through the watch. A microsecond later and it would've pierced through my hand. I try to catch my breath, the excitement of the situation has me gasping. My hand drops to my side, my watch slides off of her blade, it drops to the cold office floor and shatters. Close. Too close.

Too close. I feel tired, really tired. That took a lot of mana and it was only to stop one person, albeit this person is the Goddess of Time. Alright, thinking time detective! Where do we go that gets us the most time? What wouldn't Aion suspect. It has to be… Her Cosmic Egg! She didn't notice me enter last time! She didn't notice Cassiel! Something there is off, whatever it is, will save me. Maybe she's been lying the whole time about that place, she's been lying about everything else. Sorry Althea, I'm breaking my promise. But I believe in myself. I hope you will believe in me too. I can stop her! Alright, you can do this Cass. You were BORN to do this! I crouch down and pick up the broken watch.

Training wheels? Who needs em'? I'm a time traveller too!

A Past Already Past/9

My right-hand takes hold of my left arm. I'm shaking, I know I'm shaking, I'm trying to not shake. It hurts. I know it hurts. My breaths are short. I'm panicking, I'm at least conscious enough to recognise this. That took too much mana, I wouldn't be surprised if I pass out. Am I alone? Is she here? There it is, the endless abyss of dread that is slowly overwhelming me. Aion's domain, her world. She could show up any second. C'mon Cass! Stay conscious, stay focused, you're here for a reason! My eyes still trained forward this is… what?!

"I-it's…a lobby?! What the hell? It's a bar! With a lobby! A lobby with a bar? Semantics…" So this is the End of Time? It's not as imposing now, wherever I've ended up. I look around the lobby, spying a mirror and a hall to the left of it. Further to the left, I see a large entrance that doesn't match the rest of the room. What the heck? It's bright, it's oh… OH! I can see a bench! I can see me! The desert? THE DESERT?! Where and what is this place?

That's it! You weren't here before; you saw yourself arrive in the future. Or was I here before? SHIT! I don't know! Did I loop? Is this a time loop? Did I just create a loop? No it can't be, right? I would've recorded something like this. Then perhaps I've done this before unintentionally! Aion and I were in her dark, silent world when I gained consciousness last time I was here. Aion didn't summon me. Then did I come of my own free will? I didn't know that this was where I was going to end up. I may have gone forward in a dead timeline before, since I've proved Althea's theory as correct by ending up here. The first time I arrived here was unbeknownst to myself because I wasn't aware I was in a dead timeline.

What a creepy feeling. I was in a dead timeline? One that another version of me was working in. What was I doing? Everything builds into a bigger picture but I can't see it yet. Hmm, why did Aion

have my watch? Supposedly, I gave it to her, she said as much. Regarding that final investigation, I don't remember everything but I think I was, what was I doing? I'm too reliant on my diary. I should get better at committing things like this to memory. Oh well, not like it matters. It's the End of Time. I have to beat Aion. How can I beat her? Can she even be beaten? She's a Goddess. How do you stop that?

What are you doing doubting yourself, Watson? You made your choice, there is only one thing to do. One of us will live, one of us will die. The winner will continue the cycle. The loser liberated from duty. My vision gets hazy. My eyes heavy and full. The weight of my words pull down on me. Do I take her burden and carry it until the end or does she "free" me and carry the burden herself. I walk towards the wall beside the bar, noting an exceptionally large door next to a strange looking panel. It's labeled from top to bottom as

MONTH

DAY

YEAR

TIMELINE

Interesting… What mechanism could this be? Time travel, in some way or another, obviously Cass. Thank you for the commentary brain, now try coming up with a better idea! I return my focus to the panel. I guess I input a date and timeline on this and then… travel to it? Is that what is behind this door? Some sort of time travel device? Well, lets give it a try.

MONTH 12

DAY 25

YEAR 20XX

TIMELINE 1

I await something, anything. Some sort of indication that I put things in correctly but nothing

happens. Hmm, I change timeline to "37564". Once more, I am met with silence but an answer this time. These are dead timelines, ergo, there is no where for the machine to travel to. Only Aion can travel to dead timelines and those privy with the knowledge but now that leads to the question of what Aion needs this machine for. Why would this be here? It truly is a hydra. For every question I defeat, ten more come to replace it.

Well, I'm not going to call it just yet. I need to see if this thing actually works, test it out a bit more. I reach down for timeline panel and punch in "18782." A dinging noise springs my ears to life and the door next to the panel opens up. This looks like an elevator? I walk slowly towards it, hoping not to see any unwanted guests inside, but it’s is empty. I stare along the cylindrical walls of the elevator, taking note of all the spinning gears that cover it. I look down and the floor seems to be glass or some sort of see through material.

Below the floor is an endless chain of gears that spiral down, this looks incredible. It's like an elevator that takes its passengers to various points in time and to any timeline. Well, assuming the timeline exists. Pretty creative. I turn away from the elevator door and walk back to the panel.

"I suppose that gives me some method of escape if things with Aion go south. It's not pocket sand but it'll do! Anyways, why is this here? Why would Aion need a device to time travel? Why is there a bar here? Why is any of this here?"

I stare at the panel, awaiting an answer that will never arrive. I sink down, crouching, putting my head into my thighs and breathe. I haven't given myself a second to rest. A second is an amount of time I don't have. But I give myself that moment of rest anyways.

“Hey Aion! Would you mind just stopping this and fixing the timelines? It would make my life so much easier!” I don't think she'd listen to that. I think she's probably long past the point of words. The crushing loneliness of spending 99% of your time alone. I guess that kinda does explain her behaviour. Nobody other than a perfect being could be the God of Time. Only perfection itself could

carry that weight. Someone so unfaltering. Someone with such an iron will. Maybe once upon a time she was a normal girl like me… A normalish girl like me. And here I am at the End of Time. No ideas, no plan, no nothin'. Just doing what I do best, running from my problems.

I close my eyes, take a deep breath. The darkness envelopes my imagination. It's like I'm curled up and floating in a pool of emptiness. When did you stop dreaming Aion? Does your imagination no longer run wild with thoughts of what could be? Or do you close your eyes and just see the dark? Has that darkness just gotten darker? Would that be like being dead? Do you care if you were dead? How would you even know if you were dead or not if you aren't a person? I guess underneath the darkness of the universe for eternity, it eventually stops mattering. Is that sad? I think it's sad. My heart aches. These feelings are too overwhelming. What if I just kept my eyes closed. Would I stop feeling this eventually? Maybe I should have just died a long time ago. Would I know if I died? Would I realise that I died or would I stay in that pool of darkness, returning to the void. Have I been dead? Am I even me anymore? I clench my legs tightly, silently.

“You made it. Or you will make it, eventually.” My ears pick up that sound. A ripple through the pool of darkness, a shining light to lead me home, and an all too fearsome noise to accompany it.

Snap

Did I fall asleep? I hear footsteps in front of me, a confident stride pressing into the floor, the sound of it echoing throughout the room. Where is she going? She's not walking towards me, at least not directly towards me.

“I’ll make this?” I respond faintly.

“Well, you did make it in the past and you’ll make it again in the future.”

“The future?”

“Does this look like my style at all, Cassandra?”

“Well, the mirror kinda looks like something you'd like.”

“You put it in for me. So I’d have someone to talk to at the End of Time.”

“I put it in for you?”

“Correct.”

“When will it happen?”

“The next reset.”

“The next reset?”

“Yes Cassandra, the next reset.”

“So then, why do everything you've done up to this point?”

“Because when it comes back around we'll be cursed to continue the same work we've already done.”

“I see. All that for nothing in the end huh?” I pick myself up off of the floor and finally see her. Perfection. She is the living definition of it.

“My previous teacher was you Cassandra. And now I am yours. This cycle that continually devours itself while rebirthing itself. Ouroboros, whatever you want to call it. I suppose at some point I was jealous of your life, I wanted my own little note in your history.”

“THAT’S IT?!” I reply.

Aion stares at me with a disgusted face. She probably thought I already knew. Get back on track! Aion knows all of this, why does she know it? If time reset, Aion shouldn’t have knowledge of something that no longer exists. That's just gotta be logic or something. Well, we have been chatting like buddies so far. I don’t see why we can’t continue for the time being. Aion makes herself some sort of drink and takes a sip of it. Her face reflexes back for just a moment. How odd. Too strong huh? I guess she doesn't usually make her own.

“Aion, why do you know this?”

With a deep, heavy breath, Aion shuts her eyes, her face reverting back to her stoic look. She

grabs her left elbow with her right hand and turns her head towards the empty desert. “You told me a long, long, long time ago. Cassandra, the Time Lord in her final days or rather, you were also a Goddess. "Aion" and "Cassandra Watson." I wanted to be the final one, carry the final burden. I didn’t want you to experience that again. No more… no more… ” Her words are heavy, they hang out of her mouth.

“I died? The universe and time ended?” She nods her head.

“It ended, just like someday this universe will end to. But I wanted to do more than end it. I wanted to sever the connection that bound us to this curse. This eternal damnation that makes us spend our entire lives alone, save for but a small part of time where we interact with humanity.”

“You were with her at the end though?”

“We only appear at the end of time to be trained as the next Goddess. When the universe resets we ourselves are reset, save for the training we are given. The only memory we keep of the previous universe. We are born perfect. There is nothing beyond our capability; then we wait. Holding out for the creation of the universe and start it all over.”

“How did you retain the knowledge of the cycle after the reset then?”

“I cheated. I forced my way forward with the machine you're standing by.” Aion crosses her arms, staring coolly at the bar counter. Her face is sombre. I never thought I’d see her make that face again. I look back at the time machine. I guess if she wasn't the Goddess yet she couldn't utilise her time abilities.

“She was my best and only friend. I didn’t want her to have to go through all of this again. So, well, you know what I did.” Aion’s shoulders slump, she takes a deep breath and looks out into the gate, staring at the desert. Maybe her eyes are on the other me out there that’s already gone.

“But isn’t that…”

“Isn’t it what Cassandra? I have done all of this. ALL OF IT. For you.” Aion screams at me,

throwing her drink at the wall. I can hear her voice strain itself, the amount of passion built into her words. Such a quick change of mood!

"But it's wrong, Aion. To rob the lives of all those who exist for me? Not just those who exist but those who exist in other timelines! That's just cruel! How could you ever rationalise that?! Did you stop for a second to think about how I'd feel? I'm not *your* Cassandra Watson! I'm my own person. I have my own beliefs and ideas!" I send my feelings back to her, no matter what she thought, this can't be justified.

"Cass…"

"No! Don't Cass me! Aion! This is insane! I can't allow this to go on any longer. I have to go back and change this history. I'm sorry Aion but I can't accept this gift. I can't accept you. If you represent the end, death, then I will represent the beginning, life. I will let the cycle continue; I will chase after life because I love it! If you would still usher in the end, then with all my might shall I oppose you." I clear my throat and stare at Aion, I feel the flame of passion burn in my heart.

"Why do you put others above yourself? Why do you choose to follow a cycle that does nothing but leave you as a single survivor in a universe full of people who will never think beyond a single day? The crushing loneliness, the unforgiving pain that it brings you! It is absurd to think that their worthless existence only serves to push an idea that life has meaning! Stuck repeating the same tasks over and over again! There is no meaning! There is no integrity! There are no rules! The absurdity of their actions for their absurd creators!" Aion's gaze pierces my soul. I can't rationalise it for her. Not anymore. I'm gonna give it to her. This isn't your story Aion! It's mine!

I clear my throat and remove my jacket. I unbutton my collar and make myself more comfortable. Breathe Cass. In and out. Relax. Respond to her. Tell her what you feel. Show her you are not the lost child she found all those years ago. Show her how much you've learned on your Journey so far. Show her that you have grown up. She might listen if you reply tactfully and

eloquently. Alright, let's do this Cass! I slap my cheeks and let loose!

"Because those people deserve to live their lives out. They do not labour for nothing! They enjoy life! I've seen it! I've seen their cities full of life and laughter! I've seen their accomplishments as they cleverly domesticated fire, as they created sounds to form speech and music, as they built civilisations, as they told each other tales of legends and myths of humans before them, as they conquered the seas and as they entered the skies and space! From a cup of noodles sitting on a table in a living room in Tokyo to the stars and beyond; they are always pushing forward, always achieving the impossible! It is not condemnation to repeat the same tasks only to start over with every reset! Good and Bad compose the struggle of life together! Their actions are full of passion, full of love. How can you not imagine them anything other than happy Aion? You must acknowledge this as the truth as they have. They know the certainty of their fates; they know they will die! And yet they still conquer the truth! You have to believe that they are happy! I know I am!"

I am met with silence. I can hear my heart beating in my chest. I'm fighting back all these emotions that are boiling up inside me. The air is still and calm. I can reach her! I know I can! She isn't rebutting anymore! Aion stares into the distance, the End of Time. Did I get through? Has she changed her mind?

"AND WHAT ABOUT MY STRUGGLE CASSANDRA?! WHAT ABOUT MY SADNESS!? MY SORROW!? MY SUFFERING?! MY DESPAIR!? AN ETERNITY SPENT WAITING TO DIE! AN ETERNITY SPENT WAITING TO TRAIN MY SUCCESSOR TO DO THE SAME!" Aion fires back at me, looking for something. I think she's looking for someone to listen to her. Someone to be there for her and to tell her everything will be ok.

"The struggle is beautiful, Aion! Our struggle is beautiful! You won't end my journey. You won't end OUR journey!"

Aion stares off into the distance again, still and silent.

“This is the power of purpose, Aion. That's what makes life worth living. The struggle. The battle. Even if you don't win.” I smile at her. I don’t know if anything got through to her, but I tried. I can say I tried.

“I… I don’t care anymore… just… go… leave me… alone…”

Tears fall from my eyes, I’m at my emotional breaking point… I can hardly see what’s in front of me.

“DON’T GIVE UP AION! DON’T GIVE UP ON ME, ON YOURSELF, ON HUMANITY!” I shout my words.

“IF I ACCEPT YOU, THEN EVERYTHING I’VE DONE WAS FOR NOTHING! I DON’T FAIL! I… I… AM PERFECTION! I AM PERFECT! I… I... UGH.” Her voice begins to choke up, she coughs in a fit and the final shot lands in the palm of my hands.

“IT’S OK TO FAIL! FAIL AION! LEARN FROM YOUR ERRORS. LET IT SPRING GROWTH WITHIN YOU. IF YOU WANT FALL TO THE DEPTHS OF DESPAIR, FALL! I’LL BE RIGHT THERE TO PICK YOU BACK UP!”

We complete our shouting match. Our throats give out, fighting an emotional battle.

“Aion?” I call one final time out to her. No anger or malice found within it. No more sorrow, no more happiness. No more smiles, no more frowns. No more hope, no more despair.

Just Cassandra. Just Aion.

Floating Future View/10

"Stubborn to the end. Two halves of the same coin I guess." Aion says. I sigh.

"Looks like it. So this is your answer?" I shrug my shoulders and keep my declaration strong.

"What I want and what you want are two incompatible views."

"I don't think so. In fact, I think you learned much on your own journey. As you grew lonely at the end, becoming well acquainted with pain. You understand the cruelty of the travelling companion that is sorrow. But exile did not seek you Aion. You sought it and for your final days did you seek to rob humanity of it's fruits, it's treasures and its hope." Silence. Not unexpected. How can you still be so stubborn?

Clenching my fist, I stare at my mirror. A perfect woman who encapsulates the idea of flawlessness. Nothing short of 100%. Not a doubt in her mind that every step she took was the better option. I know what to do now. She knows what to do. And yet, I'm afraid. There isn't a single thing that she doesn't outclass me in and yet, I have to try.

"Your answer is based on falsehood. It is your duty, it was my duty, to watch the stars fade to black. To watch the last bit of sand fall down the glass. To watch life come and go. To live, experience, grow and laugh and smile and hurt and cry. Isn't that why you have that body now? A form to finally encapsulate that perfection and to show it off to the world. Is that not who Aion is? How could you turn your back on everything? Those experiences make you Aion. And so I ask you, one final time. Where did the friendships go? The smiles and celebrations? The burnished warrior. The pride of princesses. All the time has come and gone. As it was supposed to and endured it's fate. The good and bad all lay silent on the world. The work done below, organising those of sin and without. Earth is empty and so are you. If you have no words for me left, then there's only one thing

left to do between us."

The sands around her shift and a sword flies into Aion's hand. Our eyes lock. This is it I. But maybe it has to be like this. A sadistic and prideful God. Giving up to a dummy like me? She wouldn't be able to live it down. Ok, final boss time. I toss my jacket away on sand. No gun, no potions, just this massive brain. I shake my hands, loosening them up for the flurry of punches I'm gonna need to smash into her head so get her to come to reason.

"Well then, I suppose I should indulge this. I will make you understand my determination time traveller. My final encounter. Brace yourself!"

Aion, swift as ever, finds her way to Cass' face. An up close and personal encounter with her fist greets Cass, less gracefully than the previous chat. The force behind the hit powered by millennia upon millennia of hidden trauma, pain, anger, sorrow and now, determination helped disfigure the person that received the vicious move. Time was swift. Ever was the advantage of The God of Time. Flying off into the endless sands, rag dolled, Cassandra's body was seemingly unprepared for the first strike to be so violent. The sands that her body travelled down were parted in half. Normally, sand would exert an equal and opposite force on objects that push on it but, where she had flown left a trail of shiny, reflective glass. Of course she had planned for that though, over all the cases she had gone through and fights she made it out of, time protects her too. Shaking her head and looking up at the half kilometre or so she had been knocked out into, she gathers herself and takes note of the situation. The squeaking sounds from the sands set the stage.

"Aion totally outclasses me. It's not even close. I did all that big, righteous talk but to fight her, bare handed at that… She's a monster. Ok, what can I do? Think Cass think. You've been in bad situations before. Aion punched you, it was a strong hit. Insanely strong and fast too. But you saw her, she didn't vanish into thin air. She clearly wound up the punch and mashed it into your face. Then either she's slowed down or you've gotten used to it. Yeah, that's it! You might not be at her

level but she's not perfect! Not anymore!"

"Is this some sort of cope? Talking to yourself? Rationalising the mistake you've made?" With disdain, Aion's voiced travelled towards Cass, followed by a second punch. The air would feel the might of God but that was all this time. Quick thinking saves her face from another hit as she had seemingly vanished away, no different from her opponent. She could slow things down just enough to not take a lethal hit. That would be her only edge, one that her opponent shared by nature.

"Lucky you. You know how few are able to dodge my hits. You're on the list now, congrats."

"Thanks! But that first punch told me everything I need to know. This fight is mine Aion!"

Laughter erupts out of the imposing figure standing in the sea of yellowish grey grains.

Cass focuses on the figure that stands out in opposition to her, she could see waves of heat radiate off of her. Aion is upset. Putting it simply as upset isn't enough. Sometimes when someone is upset or mad, you can feel it, the pressure. The soul crushing pressure that permeates the air around the two. Gritting her teeth, Cass braces for the storm that approaches. Visions of movement enter her mind. The impossibly imposing figure of Aion stood over her, her body arced back as if she is winding up a punch. The air is thin, Cass is choking up at the sight. Her expression morphs into a fearful girl, afraid of the sound of the shifting sand, carrying the hit that could end her life. Sweat rolls down her cheeks and in that moment, Cass feels what so many before her felt when faced with the judgment of a God. As the punch approaches, she can make out details of her face. A fearful expression, wide eyed, iris' gone, it was scary, terrifying. A horror out of Althea's own grimoire. The world was oppressively dark, and yet she could still see. The white of Aion's hair and the blue of her eyes might've given relief, if they weren't the cause of these tyrannical feelings. And as soon as it starts, it ends, leaving Cass breathless.

"Hah! Kidding! Should've seen the look on your face!" Aion points and laughs at her target. Trying to reach her senses, Cass touches her neck, checking if there was something around it,

constricting her breathing. It slowly starts to make sense in her mind, the experience crashes into her entire body. This is what it's like, to challenge a God. She starts regaining her train of thought, feeling her heart pounding in her chest, she's petrified. Standing still like a doll, the life robbed from her, the light missing from her eyes. This is beyond the fear she felt when she first awoke at the End of Time. She could at least feel her body still and reach for her shaking limbs back then. It was horrifying to know that she lived only because at the moment, Aion allows it.

"Y-yeah? Wh-what's wrong? You've been standing there for a while now." Cassandra bluffs. The terror is overpowering. She'd vomit right then and there if it were any other occasion but, she can't show weakness to Aion. Not here, not now. Aion would take full advantage of the situation and she knows it. The only thing to do is nothing. If Aion doesn't react, there's no reason for Cass to react. She's looking for a reaction.

Aion's impressive staring contest ends with her looking off into the distance and adjusting her hair a bit. "Tell you what, this cat and mouse game will never end without some rules so what do you say to some sort of agreement, time traveller?" Cass takes note of being called a time traveller again but, is curious enough to bite the bait Aion has cast. This could be her out, a way to achieve some sort of victory.

"And, what are your rules Aion?" Reaching for the back of her neck, she makes a pained face. The fight, short as it is, is already putting strain on her. Being punched by that force would flat-line any regular human but, she left the realm of regular human long ago. Not to mention the phantom hit that just shattered her psyche.

"What is a drop compared to the ocean? Let me teach you the difference, Cassandra Watson! If you can hit me once, before I hit you 3 times, then you'll be the winner. Sound fair?" Standing in silence, the sandy realm at the End of Time, returns calm feelings to her. Win or lose, she said her piece and more surprisingly, Aion listened. If anything, this is a blessing. A simple condition to

follow. Any preparation that Cass makes, Aion would obviously predict. That's also what she relied on to leave Aion's guard open, or at least she hoped as much.

"Just one hit?" Cassandra asks.

"Just one." Aion responds.

"And you'll keep your word."

"I'll keep it. You know my defence is perfect, I am perfection. You won't get a single hit on me." She smirks and raises her arm, extending her hand out. Cass's eyes widen and she kicks up some sand, speeding her self up with the flow of time.

In that split second, Aion had learned just as much as Cass did. In fact, she had learned more about Cass in that moment than all their years of travelling together and solving cases. The girl with the broken pocket watch had completely vanished from her sight. Aion didn't move, stern in her spot and head held high. Proudly, she stood alone in the sands, her arm still raised, awaiting an attack that will never connect.

Cass finds her way to the hub entrance, a tactical retreat to think about how to successfully win by Aion's rules. The bench. She glances at the previous Cass, still frozen in time.

"If I'm at the End of Time, then technically I've lived a full life at some point right? Honed my skills and if that's the case, then I should be able to draw upon that experience. But how do I tap into it? How do I break into the other side? What do you think Cass? That's the only chance I have but…" All the words met with little more than sand flowing gently in a breeze from the hall staring into the other room.

"She wanted to retire me like all the other Cassandra's but you're still here. You might not be alive but you're here and you're the only other Cassandra I've seen. The graves… are those real? Retire… me. She wanted the watch back… What else was she saying? What she could "spur" within me? That whole encounter was such a trip." Staring back at the area, the giant clock had sunk

further into the sands, maybe that's why the tick and tock sounds had been absent this time.

"Does that mean there's a flow of time here? Other than Aion and I messing with the flow. Wait, Cass you idiot! If you're messing with the flow then the flow of time exists! Right? Tell me I'm right, Cass."

"Yeah Cass you're right, and you're so smart too!" Cassandra murmurs under her breath to herself. She sighs and sits down, pulling her watch out and staring at it. A large split down the middle of the watch reflects two halves of her face and she lets out another sigh. "Go against the current and you're just stuck in place but if you let it push and pull you, that's to experience life. Heh… I wonder if she'd think that sounds cool…"

"Everyone has already come and gone, now it's up to me…" As Cass declared to Aion earlier, she took upon the responsibility of her timeline all on her own. Not a moment to rest and think through what her words did not only to Aion but to herself as well. Was she capable of shouldering all of the good and bad of humanity?

"Ah, how I long for those halcyon days of old. When the world was simple, or perhaps, I was the simple one… You get back up Cass, whether it's good or bad, you get back up. All you gotta do is hit her. Just once!" She raises her watch to her face and stares at it while it swings back and forth. What possibilities still lie hidden behind its face? Within her is the unwavering belief that no matter how awful, dire the situation becomes, things will always get better. Temporary sadness will never overwhelm the greater good.

"To spur me on, she wanted me to do something? But what? What did she want at the end of eternity? What was it? Why doesn't she say anything?" Sinking into the bench, she combos it with resting her head on the shoulder of her alternative. A different her but still her.

Did I miss something? Did she miss something? My watch. What does she want it back for? Why go through so much, what is the link? Surprisingly, Aion hasn't come after me. Is that because she

thinks she doesn't need to? The silence is starting to get to me. You'll think of something, you always do.

I sit back up and stare intently at the watch again. A full examination of her device. A record of history, the beginning of time to the end. But alas, other than the cut into it, there's nothing.

"Why don't I just… give it back then? An easy trade right? The watch for the timeline. I have no chance against her, she knows this. She has found me everywhere I've gone, well except Atlantis, but that's a special case. Not like I'll be finding my way back any time soon either." I can feel my forehead tighten with worry. Aion, my watch, the other Cass, me. My core foundation for logic and reason is gone. I haven't learned anything since the start of this journey. I'm hopelessly wandering around in a hopeless situation. I know better than anybody that Aion is unbeatable. Our last encounter proved as much; all I had managed to do was run. Run for what? The truth is…

You can't escape infinity.

And then for a moment, she felt tired. For who knows how long, she was running around time, searching for an answer. For truth. Perhaps this is why the Cassandra next to her took a seat, to close her eyes and rest. She lowered her arm and sat back, shutting her eyes to the glow of the world.

"Ever fleeting, compared to you, beauty ends in an instant. Isn't that enough reason?" She reopens her eyes and gone is the fatigue and weariness of her travels. Her body is light, rested, hollow. Whatever ailments existed within her before had vanished. A voice replies to her words.

"If it were beautiful it would last forever. Am I not proof, Time Traveller?" Snarky and sharp, it travels confidently.

"Hmph, let's find out, Aion." A smile forms across the face of the Time Traveller, and she leaps for her victory. Faster than light, the Time Traveller would've taken out the God then and there if she wasn't suspicious of what was going on.

“How did you? What is this? It’s Ridiculous!” Keeping up with her pace, the two clash at each other. Hits fly in between, close, but never upon one another.

“The space here is warped and time is bendable. I am only playing by established rules.”

“So you’ve finally woken!”

“Hmm?” The Time Traveller gazes back over the blowing bronze tinted world; a more defined look shaped itself over her face. Sharp eyes that stare at nothing. She slowly struts over to her fallen coat, lifting it up and putting it back on. Beyond years of experience yet earned and somehow…

“A drop to the ocean still breaks though the surface!”

“Y-you’re… Ahaha… Ahahahaha… AHAHAHAH. So this is fate!? Cut the recording! Shut it all down!” The God's shouting echoes out into emptiness, who her words were for would be a question for another day as she clenches her fists. Her perfect smile now a disfigured frown.

“What are you looking at? Let me teach you to never look away from your opponent! Cassandra Watson!” She reached the Time Traveller before the sound could travel over to reach her ears. Boastful and confident, the God pushes her arm outward to land all 3 hits on the awoken being.

“Never look away. I’ll be sure to pass it on.” The time traveller's fist crashes into the Gods stomach in an upward arc, sending her off into the limitless ceiling of the world. So slow, she thinks to herself.

Perhaps Aion never looked into other possibilities, being that her state of mind was a bit chaotic after whatever had just occurred. She stares up with disinterest, wondering how long the flight back down will be. But ultimately, it didn’t matter to her. This was all the time she was allowed. The Time Traveller's body couldn’t handle much more than a minute. She returns to the bench, taking her jacket off and setting it on the lap of the girl with the snoozing face. She sits back in her original position and closes her eyes.

Stretching and opening her eyes, the familiar warm, golden glow of the area greets her. She’s

surprised to find that she had dozed off, it couldn't have been more than a few minutes but at the End of the Time, who really knows how much time passed. The more surprising sight was the body lying out in front of the bench. It wasn't just any body, it was Aion! Face flat into the sands, Cass leaps up in shock and runs over to check her condition. She was out. Totally lights out!

"Wh-what happened?! H-hey? Hello? Aion? Hey!" Cass shouts at the woman and turns her body over. Where her stomach should have been was a gaped hole, full of the brilliant technology that powers her. Wires and cords and all sorts of electronic parts. Cass is fascinated by the discovery, only having heard from other Ministry members how Aion's physical body was composed but, this was no time for that. Aion needs help. Cass taps on Aion's face, shifting to gently slapping her to make her conscious again. She presses her ear against Aion's chest, wondering if she would hear a beat.

"Ah…" Aion's eyes slowly open up to the gilded view. Radiant black hair slithers down and shining blue eyes with an unnecessarily worried face stare down at her.

"Why are you… crying… idiot." Aion's words are quiet. Pained coughs leave her mouth. "How dare you… In my presence. You… can't… kill a God…" A heavy sigh follow these words as Cass leaves the obstruction of Aion's vision and sits down next to her in the sand. Silent contemplation rests in Aion's head. Part of it was fearful. For her, who could see into the past and future, there was never an unknown. There was never an X factor that could ever have hoped to surprise her. She lived as perfection personified. When you know every road, there's no reason to be afraid. And here she is, laying with a hole in her stomach, the size of Cassandra's fist.

The other half was happy. Joyous to have witnessed something amazing. This is a most favourable result. A spark that reignited something in her. She witnessed the impossible. Success.

"The project has succeeded…" She whispers under her breath.

"Wh-what? Hey are you better now?" Cass replies, hoping to hear Aion repeat herself.

“My sword… It’s parts can be used to help…” Aion grumbles again and haphazardly lifts her broken body up. Harder than any self-depreciative night full of misery, a post depressive episode hangover with week old take-out from the fridge, she managed to pull her head up and get her own bearings. Cass cautiously stares at Aion until she was waved away and motioned towards her swords. Cass runs towards its glimmer and notices she’s slowing down. Is the sand getting deeper? Or is she simply tired?

“So I’ve been meaning to ask, why do you imagine this half as a desert?” Cass shouts to Aion.

“Because they’re the sands of time man…”

“That’s a dumb reason!”

“Dumb? It’s not dumb man.”

“It’s so cliché Aion. I would make mine a nice little park. With lots of trees for shade and a pond in the middle to have lots of animals live inside and oh a cool breeze would always be blowing.”

“Whatever, just get my sword Cass.”

“Right! Almost there! Just a se-” Her voice cut tragically short as hands from underneath her pull at her, trying to drag her into a pool of dark, viscous, bubbling fluid. Hand prints run up her legs, matching the dark colour and leaving disturbing streaks across them.

“Aion! If this is another trick, deactivate it please! I’m sinking.” Panicked and hurried, her words spilled out one after another, she was brutally ripped from the comfort she was enjoying moments ago.

Aion’s head perks up. She’s unaware of any sort of secret trick hidden away here. In the direction of Cass’ footprints, she stares in shock at what she was witnessing. A portal of the Cosmos. Darkness ethereal encroaches on Cass’ body, taking her away and into their void. As panicked as Cass is, she still pulls herself up, no matter how futile it is in the shifting sands.

“Damn it. The recording. I shut the system offline. Cass! CASS!” Struggling to get up, the

wound on her body notwithstanding, she pushes with all the might in her legs to get over to Cass. Limping over like a wounded warrior, she watches Cassandra descend to hell.

“JACKET! TAKE YOUR JACKET OFF AND TOSS IT TOWARD ME!” Aion shouts at Cass as she approaches her former foe. Her breaths are heavy, terrified, this is the second time in such a short span of time, that something happened that shouldn’t. Cass is quick to throw one end of the jacket towards Aion while holding a sleeve tight in her hand. She’s sinking quickly, already down to her waist. Hand prints now gather across her chest and arms, soon they would gather over her face.

Aion falls into the sands, diving to reach for the jacket, wishing she could pull Cassandra up. She takes a deep breath and shouts with all the remaining energy she can muster in the moment.

“HERMES! GET CASS OUT OF THERE!” The sands trembles with might, her ancient friend stirs imself awake. If there’s a moment to save Cassandra, an opportunity, she decides to toss her pride aside and do it. Cass, sunken to her chest now, the prints scatter across her fearful face as if something had found its way into infinity and violated her person. Hermes makes his way to Cass on Aion's orders. Slithering towards her simply like a snake, but as the enormous Python. A chthonic beast of old. He slides underneath Cass, sure to spring her out of the pool but is instead, sinks in with her, even speeding up the process as the large body expands the reach of darkness.

“AION!”

“CASS?!”

“There are things in this world that are beautiful because they don't last forever! Have you heard of this before Aion? In other words, you lose!” I let my voice out before the Time Goddess. I successfully thieve the Chrononaut away from her. The dark portal of my Horrors shuts, hiding Cassandra Watson away from the scene but not without some resistance from the Goddess of Time. She reaches her arm out once more, for the first time in eternity, she hoped to take hold of something precious to her but, was left pulling at nothing. Cassandra's jacket slid through her hand

and now hangs from Aion's hand, *empty.*

XI

I'm not sure how long it's been, the situation in my mind is running hectic. Repeating over and over, a failure on my end. Various parts of me ache in pain. Hermes hasn't come to get me. He must've taken some damage from that cosmic beast. It waited for us. It waited for us, all the way at the End of Time and then it waited even more so it could swoop in and grab Cass after we grew fatigued and tired. It couldn't have been given a better opportunity unless we personally invited it and let it walk right out the front door with Cass. Ridiculous. I pick up hints of sand being disturbed, someone else has arrived.

"Oh, Aion! Look at you! And Hermes too! Both fell in one swoop! If only I had arrived a moment sooner!" I opened my eyes to the sound of the voice. One I fortunately, had the pleasure of not having heard in a very, very long time.

"Hello? Can you hear me? I'm not sure if you're reacting to my voice or simply falling into some manner of coma!" My blood pressure rises, this voice always gets me irregularly upset.

"Guess it wasn't one for the taste of snakes! Left poor Hermes and you out to suffer huh? Hey, come on take my hand, let's get you up yeah?" The figure finally approach where I lay defeated. I staring up at the sky above me. The projection of the stars has vanished. This world of mine was damaged by whatever monster had forcibly entered it, but my Cosmic Egg is still up, which ultimately meant I'm still alive. I raise my hand and wait for his to grab it.

"Hermes, you there? Still got a pulse? I'll check on you in a second, just give me a thumbs up if you haven't died." It's silent for a moment. "Haha great!" I assume Hermes did the thumbs up. That stupid laugh, I hate it. He pulls me up and we walk towards something, unfortunately it's not very clear. My vision monitors are badly damaged, I can only guess what it is based on my other senses.

It’s soft to the touch, maybe it’s a bed.

“There we go, Aion! I didn’t see that coming! But neither did you! Wow isn’t that a fun feeling!” So much talking. Every time he opens his mouth it is just pure torture.

“What are you here for? Just get to the point please, as you can see I’m going to need some time to recover.” I spit my words out like venom at him, I don’t want him being around here any longer than he needs to be.

“Oh just business then today! I’m here to return you to Ardor! The Doctor said you’d be coming in for repairs, so it’d be quicker if I just got you.” The Doctor knew?! And sent Chrono?! They both conspire against me? In MY own house?! I need to vent but for now I’ll just take the free ride. I feel my body being lifted up again and placed against something as my field of vision starts to fizzle and glitch with being upright. I can sort of see now, although it's not very clear.

Chrono smiles at me and laughs again, waving at me while running over to Hermes to help him up. I stare at them as they get all buddy and buddy and they both simultaneously wave to me. I can see both of their stupid outlines getting together so, so well. It’s disgusting.

“You okay sis?” He shouts at me like I’m some pathetic creature incapable of helping themselves.

“Just take me back. Tell the Doctor to have this one repaired and to wake my real one.” I give my answer.

“You got it. No more beauty sleep for the Princess!” He answers my request with an annoying little side comment. If I had any energy left, I would use it to give him some permanent beauty sleep. Well, there’s one thing I can still do.

“I hate you so much, Chrono!”

Part Two- Alter Idem

Spiral/1

The endless abyss had finally relented. The sensation of being pulled on and grabbed at was a disgusting, degrading and filthy experience. Yet, I'm remarkably more comfortable than when I was- Wait a moment, wasn't I just in my office? I'm struck by a truck carrying déjà vu. I lift myself into a terrifyingly familiar scene. I sit up and my brain begins to power on. I become more aware of my surroundings. What did I see just moments ago?

Was it moments ago? My impression of time and what time it currently is might not add up. Looking around the room, all I notice is a window. It's dark out; it's dark inside too. Must be nighttime. I can't see the stars sparkle and glitter across the sky. Is it cloudy? I guess the only way to find out is to open it and check.

Turning my body and extending my legs, I set my feet down on the floor. The bed isn't very high up. As I get off of the bed, another surprise has awaited my arrival. My feet dip into something disturbingly wet. A dark pool of unknown liquid happily introduces itself to the cotton of my socks. Ah, another discovery. I'm clothed. Although, perhaps it would be more notable if I wasn't. Rubbing my hands on my shoulders, I feel my sleeves but, they're not sleeves of my coat. My hands travel south, running down my thighs and calves until I feel my soggy socks. Alright, it's probably my uniform sans coat and shoes. Peering below past my knees, all I can make out is a dark pool. If I taste it I could identify it… No, that'd be weird. My eyes roam around the floor and I notice some sort of blobs of mass occupying space scattered across it. Not tasting the mystery liquid definitely seems like the better idea now. If I could just find a source of light.

Well, my detective intuition has never failed me before. I can find a simple light switch. It's a room, how complex can this thing be? Poking my toes into the unknown sea, I gently flesh the area out, step by step. I measure the bed by running my hand along the mattress. I'd say it's six feet or so. That would make this a full-sized bed. It's probably for a single person. Maybe two if they were comfortable with breathing each other's breath. Well ok, that probably doesn't matter, anyone could sleep in this bed for any reason. Like me!

My silly sentiments aside, the room is probably just like any other so let's check if the bed is beside a wall. There was nothing to the left of me when I got out of the bed, so the left side is empty. I'm going to have to guess which side is the front and which is the back side. Safe to assume I woke up at the head. I travel to the opposite end. Nothing on the far side, so the wall is either to the right side or back at the front. I climb on the bed again and reach towards the opposite side, hoping I'll confirm my hypothesis. And my efforts are rewarded with an icy cold shock at the tips of my fingers. There's my wall. Now is the hypothesis true for the head of the bed. Creepily crawling across the fabric fortress, I stab my finger into the same chilling, unmovable object. Alright so everything else in this room must be on the opposite side of this bed. If I crawl along the wall I'll eventually find something to interact with. Light switch, door, anything.

I settle my feet onto the ground once more. Minding the puddle, I take several wobbly steps alongside the wall. I'm greeted by a small gap. A minuscule one but that's probably the door. An oddly warm breeze is being carried in from beyond the void. Well at any rate, this must be the way out. I blindly reach around, searching for the handle. I know as soon as I feel the knob, my heart will calm down. Plus it'll allow me to search for answers to my predicament. My first answer is about waist high on my left-hand side. Perfect!

I gently open the door and terror embraces me. Something dreadful awaits me at the end of the hall. The realisation suddenly hits me. This room wasn't to hide me away, it's protecting me. It's like

I was a dog fenced off yard. That fence served to protect me from the outside world. A barrier made of my common sense that served to protect me and didn't predict something else finding a different way in. For instance, a dog would never expect a leopard leap over that boundary.

Within the shadows of the hall it arises, a form I can't make out nor understand. Horrible shrieks echo throughout my mind; I was prey, and it predator. I feel helpless in the moment. The oppressiveness of its gaze was horrifying and yet I feel something else stir within me. I stare into eyes of impressive determination. I see my own head slashed right off, fall onto the floor, and stare at my killer. I can see them. They can see me.

How did I get here? I need retrace my steps. I recall being in my office, staring down at the mountain of files that needed to be signed off on and marked as closed. I was reading a missing persons report at lunch. What else can I remember…

Date: March 23rd, 1994 Time: 1300 hours

Location: Brooklyn Precinct

A new case landed on my desk. No, it wasn't actually new, it was updated. Cases don't usually make their way back to me but this one required my attention. Let's see what else I can remember. There was a string of reports that people were going missing. Then a couple of days later they'd return like nothing happened. No harm, no trauma, the people were right as rain. Just disappeared for a bit.

"Check that report yet, Watson?" The male voice asks.

"No. The one you dropped off before lunch?" A female voice replies.

"Yeah. What'd you get by the way?"

"No, of course not. Why would I read a report like that before lunch? And to answer your question, I ordered some butter toast. And the seasonal fruits. And some strawberry ice cream. And a slice of black forest cake. And some pancakes. And a chocolate parfait."

“It’s your job, isn’t it?” He replies sarcastically.

“To eat? I wish. But no, I’ve not read the report yet.” Watson raises an eyebrow after lifting the cover of the folder. Her head reflexes back in disgust, sick of having to read through incidents all morning long.

“This is the report for the second victim of the city wide vanishing act?” She picks it up and starts to read the revision. Hovering her desk, the other investigator sips from his cup, staring down at the file for a moment.

“Hate this brand. Anyways, they found the body last night.” He clears his throat uncomfortably and shoots a nervous glance. He wasn’t usually one to get shaken up by this sort of stuff.

“Where at?” She returns the nervous glance. She never had a case she completed get turned on its head like this.

“Basement of the home.” His voice is distinctively more quiet and solemn. Anybody would react this way if someone they had thought they saved turned up dead.

“That’s… insane. We saw her a few days ago. She was fine right?” She asks.

“Yeah.” He responds.

“What even tipped the team off? How did an officer gain entry back into the house?” Staring down at her toast, her appetite slowly rolls back and hides itself in the deepest pit of her stomach.

“A neighbour called in, said they heard glass shatter in the backyard or something like that. It wasn’t enough to warrant an emergency but since the house was hot, leadership had a couple of force members sent out to check for any disturbances.”

“So this lady goes missing, shows up a couple days later, and now she’s dead? Her head is chopped off in the basement of her own home and nobody knows what happened?” Watson closes the harrowing file, having read the surprise at the end. She stares up at the other investigator, further questioning him.

“Where or what was the broken glass? Was the glass the weapon? How did they discover it?” She continues.

“No, not the weapon. The glass is from a broken window. It's across from the bed the lady sleeps in. We figure it’s her bedroom. We never got a full layout of the house” Watson’s partner leans back on the door, letting out an audible exhale and putting his hands into his pocket.

“Someone broke her window?” She further inquires of her partner.

“We have reason to believe the victim broke it herself, maybe attempting to leap out of it to escape. Her right hand had light cuts over it. There was a T-shirt covered in glass and blood in the room. But the thing is, her window was already open. As it says in the report, a neighbour is certain they saw it. Something was already inside the home. Maybe she couldn't think straight and was in a panic.”

“And then whatever is inside drags her to the basement and kills her?” Watson stares off into the windows of her own office. The sky is an escape. A fleeting feeling. A gateway to another world. Free of shape or form. What did the victim see when she looked out of her window in a desperate attempt to cling to life…

“The neighbour didn’t hear any cries for help or screams with that open window? Just the shattering of glass?” She continues her train of thought, trying to piece the scene together in her head.

“Unfortunately not. Neighbour said it was just glass. Couldn’t see too far into their yard either, a six-foot high wooden fence separates the properties.”

“There was a big enough threat to jump out of the window rather than run out towards the front or back doors? Did we find out when our culprit had the weapon? While they were still in the room or when the victim was moved to the basement?”

“Well, that’s why the file is on your desk now, Watson. Good luck.” She lowers her brow at him

and shoots a judging gaze upward to back it up.

“Very funny. But it’s so odd, why would they lop her head off?”

“Can’t say for sure. Seems to have been done with a hunting knife, there are tells from the dimensions of the cuts and all that. Maybe a disgruntled ex-partner?”

“I don’t think there was anything about a partner when she went missing. Geez why the HELL did you bring this up? Especially during lunch. I have zero appetite now.” Dejectedly, Watson pushes her plates away, as the morbid lunch hour seized her desire for cakes and sweets.

“Aha, my bad!” My partner’s nonchalant attitude seemed to have brought me some form of peace thinking back on it. I suppose I need to adopt the same now to keep my head in the game. I know what they wanted me to find out at the house and I know that I'm the only one who had the ability to find out. But now it's an entirely different story, one that I'm afraid of.

Slowly robbing me of my peace, the light drains, and shadows overflow. Something is tugging at me. An anxious feeling that wants me to lift my eyes and lay my vision bare at the world around me. My mouth is dry. It’s as exhausted as I feel. My tongue feels like it's wrapped up in bandage, thieving me from the usual comfort of my own mouth. Exhausted, exhaling and barren, I can recognise that I’m slowly waking up. Snaking up my back is the sensation of dread. What was I looking down at? My head felt like it was being pulled on. No, not my head, my mind, my consciousness. My right arm is shaking, I know it’s shaking. When did it start? When I woke up or was it long before that?

My breaths are short, I can begin to hear them while my chest rises and falls. Turning my head to the right feels like a herculean task. Slowly, so impossibly slowly, I turn to stare out at sights familiar to me. An empty room. A window sits across from me. A phantom stares at me.

My body is aware of something my mind is not. If I’m lucky, maybe the Demogorgon has finally found me. That would catch me up on some extra work.

“How many times was that?” Why I said that out loud, I don’t know. Maybe I’m afraid of discovering why. Yeah that’s right, I am afraid. I’ve seen this scene before. Yeah that’s right, I’ve seen it many times before. Right on cue, she answers me.

“One thousand and one.”

“Ah, one too many. How did I miss them all?” I respond, half wondering if there was someone who answered or if it was a voice in the back of my head. I’ve really got to stop getting into situations like this. Even if it wasn’t my fault, I’ve found myself yet again in a strange setting. The pull of rumour and chance had us eager to finish this business with Erebus and more importantly, cut my boss’ stress in half. Well at the very least, it seems I’ve regained my senses. The warmth of the bed would be the last bastion of comfort I would feel for a long time. Suddenly, the lights shutter on one by one, shoving the shadows back into purgatory. The light reveals to me what is hidden away. Maybe it’s a power thing since they didn’t all turn on at once.

I reach for my neck, as if I had a phantom incident. As if there was a me that had her head sliced off. I feel around for any sort of cut, gash, wound, scab, anything that would indicate an injury. I pull my left hand up and wrap my fingers around my neck. They feel icy cold but, I don’t feel anything out of the ordinary. Turning my neck left to right, I still have motion of my neck and jaw. I can feel my skin stretch, I still totally have a head. At least for the time being. My memories, however, feel foreign. This wasn’t just amnesia or a gap in them. I feel like I’m being drip fed information from another mind. Like I'm dissociated from my own. I’m unable to confirm what is real, this is going to be an issue.

A desk is across from me and above it, a window. There’s a large office type chair in front of the desk. I notice a pair of legs hanging down to the floor from it. There’s someone in the chair! I leap out of bed and walk over to whoever's sitting. A creaking noise from the floor echoes in the silent room. Well, that certainly gave away my presence so I hope whoever is on the other side of this

won’t be too surprised by me. I have no reason as to how or why I’m here. I have no idea how I'm going to explain anything...

I approach the chair and peek over it. It's a very high-quality build chair, must be very expensive. My eyes glaze from the head of the chair to a person’s back, they’re crouching over the desk as if they were sleeping. I say as if because there is nothing laying within the arm pillow they had made on the desk. A better way to put it would be to say that something is between their arms, but not the something I had expected. A crater leaks out viscous crimson fluid where their head should be. It had made the sleeves of this person’s coat a very dark and bitter shade of black. For a tenth of a second, I see what seems like visual interference over the body. Similar to TV static from those really old models shivering across the screen. I take a step back in shock and unluckily plant a foot on a small stack of books. It trips me and I fall, crashing on the floor. I stare up in horror at the desk and watch a shining, reflective object fall down onto one of the books.

I stare at the spot it fell and decide to grab it. My left hand reaches out and pulls it all back. Rustic and dusty, the cover appears to have a big, red heart on it. Unfortunately, this big red heart has been pierced right in middle. Now that I get a look at it, this book is more akin to a journal with a hard cover. Maybe it's used for some note taking or something. I peel it open, taking a look at the first page. Perhaps this will give me clues as to what’s going on.

“One winter evening, I had spent far too long staring into my mirror. Gazing upon myself I felt twisted and sick. I had carved words callously on a soft page, for a recipient who can no longer respond. The moonlight evaporated away, with the final cloud now thieving the light from us, hiding the ground around her. A pool below reflected what little iridescence remained off of the glass I was staring into. The rustic liquid is still dripping in, sending slight ripples through the substance. She reached for the other arm, carving down the street.

Precise in her movement, careful to not to let her enjoyment end prematurely. Metal falls onto the

harsh, frigid ground, unmoved by the actions from above. Her freed hand runs along the crimson spilled appendage. Her fingers tenderly press against the fleeing warmth. A smile creeps across her face. The hair on her arm standing up. Not because it was cold. She was excited.

“Never made the mark.”

Her hand pulls away from the engravement. Her fingers lift up to her face. The index runs across her upper lip. The middle speeds over her lower lip. This colour was her favourite. Plentiful in supply. Hard to access. Helpless was the victim, their voice locked away by fear.

Arms and legs picked and plucked at. Forced to stare at the hallowed face of beauty. Eyes widen as the other presses into her. Their lips touch. The cool surface returns it with full confidence.

Electricity sends shocks through her body.

“Nobody ever thinks about what happens when the fairy tale ends…”

Scrapping across the ground once more, the sounds to ring throughout her soul for eternity. She picks it back up. It digs into her neck. All the red stains her body. But this was no issue. No one cares when it doesn’t involve them. It glazes all the way across. The sickly sounds raised her spirits. The voice vanished. The body fell. The crown rolls away. She presses her face into the ground, drowning herself in indulgence.

“Did it hurt?”

The stillness of the night air fills her with anxiety.

“Why are you ignoring me?”

Cold winds push onto her. Her chest tightens.

“Answer me! How dare you ignore me!” She turns away.

“I’m done with you.”

Her whispers nearly covered up by the wind. Her big, red, heart in hand. Running circles around the chest. Over and over again.”

It seems to be a diary entry, or maybe some type of poem? A reflection? Or a confession?

Climbing back up, my right hand had unfortunately pressed into a cool puddle. Reflexively, I pull my hand back and see the trail of blood. I wipe my hand on my trousers, trying to clean it off. That's going to be a pain to get out later. I stare at the body seated in the chair. I saw the gushing fountain of ichor from this body, there is a trail of red leading back to it, so what's logical? That this person's blood dripped its way onto the floor. I step forward and reach out to the chair and a surprise sends new shocks throughout my system.

The chair pushes backwards, terrorising my already fatigued psyche. A red-headed girl stands up and turns around. There wasn't a hint of any struggle or blood stains on her person. The gaze of her bright green eyes pierces me. I watch the light smile that she has on her face become a very concerned grin. I reflexively put everything in my hands into my pocket, then put my hands up, hoping to show her I meant no harm. Laughing quietly under my breath I think about what to open up with to talk to her.

"Ah, I didn't mean to. Or I mean, you know it was a mistake!" I say.

"Mistake?" She replies.

"I didn't mean to knock all the books over. Sorry."

"Oh I see. It's no big deal. I think perhaps the big deal here is a stranger in my room!"

She erupts in laughter; I suppose making light of the situation helps her. Not that I have a response to that though. Before waking up I was with ■■■■. Huh? I was with someone, but I can't recall who.

"Oh yeah… I'm… Just, lost in thought. I opened the door and… you know what. I haven't introduced myself. I'm ■■■■■■■■■, ■■■■■■■■■ Watson." Oh no, it happened again, this time to my name. Well, at least not my full name. I suppose I'll just have to be Watson this time. Was I struck by a name thief? A letter thief? A sound thief?

“Ah! You lost your name too! Well, not all of it fortunately! So, what do you do Miss. Watson?” She nearly shouts at me. Her enthusiasm is giving me energy. Her uncertain look morphs into a more comfortable glow; it makes me feel better. Why am I feeling better about that? Is it because I have something to latch on to? To connect with and gain familiarity with? Like I was lost in a forest and started a fire to have a friend?

“I am a detective. Well not a detective but like an investigator. I solve crimes and mysteries.” What am I even saying. I don’t have my full uniform, so I probably don’t look the part. If I could just get my bearings I could be more proactive but for now I’ll just have to make do.

“Are you listening? Hello?” I ask her. She has a smile plastered on her face. It’s strange. This whole situation is strange. People don’t smile like this. Something about it just feels, off. Well people don’t regrow their heads either and for now, she’s the only source of information here. I need to better understand things and play along with her.

“Ah I’m sorry. Miss…I didn’t catch your name. Would you mind telling me?” I take another shot at speaking while look around the room, awaiting her response. A pile of books, a dresser, and a desk with a computer on it. A closet is next to the desk, one of the doors is open and there are clothes on the floor around it. There’s a lot I didn’t notice earlier, even the floor, it’s wood. No wonder I never heard my footsteps, my socks were deafening the sound. No creaking noise either, this is a sturdy floor. The blood is gone too! I look down at my hands, checking both for any signs of the crimson staining. Nothing. Nothing at all.

“I don’t have one. I did say you lost yours too! I think it’s lucky you didn’t lose your whole name like me.” My attention snaps back to her. She has a hair tie or scrunchie on the side of her head, covered in hearts, sending a ponytail sideways to the left. I guess that could be her name for now.

“How about a nickname, until we fix this business with our names?” I ask her. She’s still smiling at me. I smile back at her, nodding my head.

“A nickname? That’s a good idea. What were you thinking?” She turns her head at me, admiring amazing idea I had come up with. I point to my head, around the same area her scrunchie is.

“Heart. Is, Heart ok? Since you have hearts on your head.” I nervously laugh, awaiting an answer to my silly idea. She nods at me and returns the message.

“Heart, because of the ones on my head? Not because I have captured yours? Ufufu.” The end of her sentence is drowned out by her laughter. I return the laughter and my gaze drifts towards the door. What does she mean by saying she captured mine? Like, she thinks I've fallen in love with her? Whatever, it’s time to start investigating what exactly is going on here. She might know something, but I shouldn't be too obvious about questioning her. I’ll introduce things to her as naturally as I can.

“So, now that we have pleasantries out of the way, would you mind telling me a bit about what’s going on here? Is there anyone else I might be able to go and speak with? I can’t stay in your room forever and I’m sure you aren’t very comfortable with me being here either.” I ask her. Going to have to go without shoes is annoying but, there’s only one way out of here.

There are many strange things going on here and I can’t place any reliability in my memories or my senses. Tumult, confusion, and discord are running a muck within me. They have no problem tricking the mental and psychological facilities in my brain.

“Oh, my room? It’s not my room!” Her bright smile sitting on her face so naturally, unnatural. I rub my eyes to think for a moment about what our entire encounter has been like so far. Strange. That’s the only word that comes to mind. Is she messing with me? Well, I’ll get to the bottom of it when we’re both out of this place.

“Shall we go on a little adventure then? Since we’re both already guilty of trespassing?” Heart nods to me. I turn around, walking towards the door. I apprehensively reached for the door handle. I’ve seen what happens when this door opens.

“Stand back ok, just in case.” I stare at her and bite my lip, anxiously awaiting another hidden attack. Be it physical or on my psyche, the knob is jiggling in my hand. Of course I’m terrified at the thought of being a newly anointed Dullahan. But what if it was all just in my mind? If I dreamed it? To go further along this line of thinking, when I woke up, she was the one without a head. There’s too much going on here. Ok, open the door and wait on the side of it for whatever might be waiting for you, Watson.

Pulling the knob back, I swing it wide open with my other hand, waiting for my dream to become reality. I duck in anticipation of the attack. A lethal breeze blows the hair away from my face. I look back at Heart, maybe that wasn’t the best nickname, feels weird to call a person that. She’s crouching down, holding her head in her arms. I turn back towards the door and peek into the gap. It’s an empty, utterly unremarkable hallway with a dim light hanging from the ceiling. The air is suffocatingly stale. It’s likely this home hasn’t seen use in a while. The walls are stained with who knows what. But it’s hollow, completely devoid of any life. I take a deep breath and step forward.

“Ok, I think it’s all clear. Let’s head out.” I turn around and extend my right hand out toward her. She pulls her head up, smiling, and grabs my hand. Like a fire at camp. Comfort in an uncomfortable situation. We step out of the room together and sneak along the hallway. It opens up into what you would expect any house to look like. Living room on our right, kitchen on our left. Heart turns into the kitchen, hitting the light switch on the immediate left side of the wall. The lights miraculously work, giving both rooms illumination.

“I'll take the living room. You take the kitchen. Is that ok?” I ask her. She nods and we venture forward. Neither room looked much better than the hallway from the initial glance. Light reflected off the glass door to what I assume is the front yard. It’s impressively dark out there. That information is a guess, however. Something worse may be waiting for us. Oh well, I just need something to think about to keep my mind busy. I invade the living room and look around at all the

furniture. Must have been years since this place was touched. Nothing particularly stands out here, but before I finish my search, I hear a crashing noise from somewhere behind me. Did something fall?

“Heart, are you ok? What was that noise?” I wait for a few moments, but I am not returned a response. Dilatorily, I turn around and step towards the kitchen. Maybe there still is something else hidden in the house, something that I should been even more careful of. They say there’s always a bigger fish, but my mind is constantly being bombarded, overloaded. Perhaps it's to distract me from something. But I can't let myself be taken away by it again.

I step into the kitchen, expecting to find the source of the eerie noise. What I had found instead was the source of the uneasiness I felt the entire time being here. Water is dripping into the sink. No not into it, onto it. It’s full. I approach the sink and stare inside. A plug down in the depths, reflects the eeriness of the room back at me. I continue to stare into its depths and feel it stare back into me. That’s when it strikes me. I run back to the room I had awoken in, nauseated, abhorred and fastidiously, looking for my killer.

“I think Holmes would’ve been a more fun nickname to have. Fit the dynamic you know? But that’s fine, I don’t mind becoming Watson either.” I know her voice, I’ve known it the whole time. It was my own. I stumble to my knees; a burning pain rages throughout my mind. The sensation of being pulled and grabbed at feels disgusting. Every part of my being, my soul itself is being violated but, I need to remain convincing. Every dream up to this point was a premonition. Every step I've taken I’ve already seen. If I do nothing, I wake back up in that haunted room that will burn me to my very core. She will strip me of my humanity and place me in bondage to relive this madness for eternity.

But I refuse. I thrust my hand into my pocket, reaching for the blade that had earlier pierced the journal. I made this blade stab a heart once before and now I will do it again! With all my might I

press it against the darkness that seeks to rob me of my freedom. Heart stares aghast at me, maybe I wasn't acting according to what the previous Watsons have done. All I knew however, was that she let her guard down and with it, I seize my opportunity for freedom.

Precious Heart/2

“She’s going to wake up.” A voice enters my head. It's a woman’s voice.

“Wake up?! How? You…you’re!” A male voice is responding. I’ve never heard this voice before.

“She killed me in the dream. I had to leave, I couldn’t stay, less I risk my entire being.” The woman’s voice again. I know this voice. What's going on? I'm so out of it, but the talking is slowly making conscious again. Am I sleeping?

“So what? Can you not re-enter her mind from the Dreamlands?” The male voice responds, he sounds worried.

“At best I can fool her into believing she woke up again. She just… I don’t even know how it happened. A mortal has never bested me.” I hear frustration. The woman is upset. Is she upset with me?

“How? What happened?” More frantically, the man responds again.

“She noticed something was off. I’m not sure what.” The woman sounds calmer now. Maybe she’s analysing the situation?

“Well, how did she do that? You’re, you know, you!” The man's voice is still troubled. He has a greater sense of urgency, for whatever reason.

“She just had the right timing. Maybe someone out there really likes her. I’m going to return. I'll try to keep her stuck inside her dreams.” Her dreams? My dreams?

“Right. Good. I will report that everything is working as planned. I dare not earn ****** ire.” ******? I… I’m…

The conversation between the voices in my head, was it real? I pick myself up as if had just woken up after the hardest late- night bender I had ever done. Everything feels like a blur, melded

together. I open my eyes, or at least try to. It feels like they are being held down by anchors. Slowly but surely, I manage to open them. I rub my forehead with my right hand, I don't know if this is doing anything, but it feels sort of nice. I get out of bed, slide into my slippers, and stare into the mirror across from me. A bedhead yawning after a few hours of sleep, I haphazardly wander over to the mirror. I'm not sure why I immediately got up and walked over to it. Perhaps this time I will be a vampire and my reflection won't be there. I have woken up like this for the millionth time now. I need to submit my retirement. This is not good for my health.

I gaze at my mirrored self. My hair is noticeably longer, dangling far below my chest now. The dark colour of my head blends flawlessly with the gloomy environment. My cat pyjamas outline my body hidden underneath. My nipples poke through the top, it's cold. My waist picks up the curve from where it ends at my chest. I look fuller. Huh? I reach toward the mirror, extending my creeping hand forward, wondering if it was truly my own body. Oh, that's what this is. I look like I've aged a little, my body has filled out more. Now that my eyes are adjusting I get a better look at my head. My hair strangely has different coloured roots. The base of my hair is white now. It's a sharp contrast with the long, dark strands over my chest. It looks like some hair dye was fading away, revealing the original colour beneath. Or maybe I'm just getting old. I turn around and sit back down in the bed I had been sleeping in. The realisation hit me as I stare at the outline of the furniture I was sleeping in. It's not furniture at all. It's a bizarre, futuristic looking pod that has the top open. I lay back down and hope this is only the latest rendition of the dream sequence I had been in.

A noise somewhere in the back of my head keeps me awake. The tip of my spine feels the chill of time immemorial run down my body. A dull electronic light hums above me, illuminating the room only slightly. I lift myself up once more into the partial darkness. The faintly cream coloured room looks artificial.

"Hey, get up."

There's the sound. It's a voice. Someone is saying something. I slide back into my slippers and look around the room. I hadn't noticed this the first time but, there are several more pod like devices just like the one I was in. I rub the back of my head and yawn. I didn't feel it earlier but a wave of fatigue crashes into my body and my breathing becomes laborious. I was sleeping yet I'm tired.

"Of course, you're tired. You have been busy for the past thousand years."

"What? Who? Where are you?" I look around the sickly room, wondering where the other voice is coming from.

"You will never see me that way Chrononaut. I am you."

"Ch-Chrononaut? Who me? I'm… how do you know that?!"

"I know everything there is to know about you, Cassandra Watson."

"Elaborate. Explain. Tell me."

"I have gotten to know you very well for the past 1000 years."

"How?"

"I have spent a 1000 years trying to steal your body."

"Rather straight to the point aren't we? But why?"

"Unfortunately, I don't know why you're still here… Our last meeting was in a dream."

"A dream?"

"Waking up in a former case, meeting a mysterious stranger, stabbing her to death. Ring a bell detective?"

"Stranger… stabbing… you're… Are you Heart?"

"That name was imposed upon me by you yes. For dream after dream I studied you. Learned about who you are. How you behave, speak, act. Everything. I guess you could say I'm your number one fan."

"Why?"

"To become you. To steal your ability."

"Time Travel?"

"Yes."

"You did that for a thousand years?"

"Yes."

"A thousand years? Seriously?"

"One thousand! And it didn't even work! How do you think I feel about that!"

"I'm not really concerned with how it makes you feel you body thieving monster! What about me! My youth! My friends! My life!" I stared dejectedly into the mirror in front of me. I hope that I didn't miss out on too much. But come on, who wouldn't be upset hearing that?! Well if they lived that long that is. So it is entirely, uniquely, my own life that gets to experience this.

"Is this just how it's going to be from now on?" I stare at my mirror image in disbelief.

"You had best believe it doll. Not that I enjoy this anymore than you. Unreal. You're just a regular human." The worst part of all this is that this voice will forever follow me until I die. Waking up is more a punishment than a reward.

"I can hear that stupid. What's yours is mine. What's mine is yours."

"I don't need your commentary stupid! I'm just trying to adjust to my newly fucked up life. I can't believe this is how it ended up. As if I didn't have enough shit. What the fuck am I going to tell everybody? Hey guys, this evil monster tried to take over my body but fucked up. Now it just whines in my head all day." My right hand pulls itself up, as if a ghost possessed it and punch me in the face.

"OW! You bitch! I will kill you again!"

"You are so petty."

"Petty? You're in my body bitch. My body, my rules."

"I've never heard of a human who remained the same after drinking from Lethe. That in itself is a miracle. There's definitely someone watching over you." I've never heard of a survivor after who encountering the river Lethe either. That's two rare events for me. Surviving memory loss and a possession attempt. I should buy a lottery ticket.

"The river. Lethe. Are we in Elysium then?

"It starts running in Erebus and makes its way down to Elysium."

"Isn't that where like heroes and gods are sent to after death?"

"What? You think you're some hero or god? No, no, I just took you there because it was convenient. Easy. You sip the water. Forget your life, I come in. Which is what happened. There wasn't gonna be a happy ending for you kid." This is annoying. Why me? Why?

Hey, I'm here too. I hear your thoughts as my own.

Oh my god.

No need, I'm here.

I want to die.

Well, feel free. I'll take over and go back to work when you do.

Work? What work?

…

Silent now?

I don't need to tell you.

Oh is that how it is? Fine! I'll be silent forever too. Out of spite. Just to upset you. I… what am I doing right now? Returning to the darkness within the hollow medical room, I stare at the treatment pod. Locked away for a thousand year long abduction case. Apparently, memories were being strung together and studied in the experiment of the ages. I can't help but still feel a pull on my mind. It's that feeling of dissociation again. I remember learning this from Aion. Her safeguard was that if I

understood a bit of the process, I wouldn't have this happen.

There are three required stages memories go through to become, well, memories. After that are a couple more stages to complete the learning and memory process. Encoding, storage, retrieval, recognition, and recall.

Why are you so curious about memories?

Stop reading my thoughts.

I can't.

…

Just keep it down so I can think ok?

Encoding is the initial learning of information. Storage is maintaining that information over time. Retrieval is the act of remembering information. This is simply remembering something. Recognition is acknowledging the truth of the information with a suggestion. Recall is acknowledging the truth of the information without a suggestion. I can't remember my situation because of your claim that I drank from the river Lethe.

But I can't recall or recognise that this event had ever occurred either. I don't even know if this is information I had previous contact with. It is not my own memory yet I remember seeing things in my dreams. Premonitions of what was going to happen and how to avoid them. Were those experiences? Were they real if I can't place any reliability in them? If I was there and yet, not there. Am I Cassandra Watson and not Cassandra Watson now? I know I lived life; I know what my job is and who I learned from and why I'm special and yet there is a lack of trust in myself. Is there even another person in my mind or have I gone mad with time?

Hey, are you real?

As real as you are.

I want a better answer than that.

I don't have a better answer.

…

So what's your name?

Nyarlathotep.

You a cat or something?

You are so annoying. How did a pathetic plebeian like you steal Aion's attention?

Is that a no?

Nyarlathotep. I will not repeat it again.

Ok, but I don't really want to say that every time. Don't you have an easier name? A nickname? I could call you Heart again. Oh, how about Kassandra? No mix-ups there!

Kassandra?

Kassandra and Cassandra. The world will never be able to tell. Hell, now I'm doing your job for you.

What? I did have a previous name of sorts. Wouldn't you like to know how I got it or how it's a really interesting anagram for Ny…

No. Kassandra is fine. Although, I've never really sat down and planned out the logistics of a mind swap. I've thought even less about a failed swap. Whatever is going on with me, her, us? Whatever it is, I suppose I should be incredibly thankful that I'm the one in control. Or that I regained control? How peculiar, a feeling that makes me feel emptier than I had ever felt before. And yet there is something within me that makes me fuller than ever before. What can I do? What will I tell the others? Do I pretend to be Cassandra Watson? What about Aion…

Why pretend? You are her. That's why I spent so long trying to steal your body away.

That's so weird dude. Could you just shut up?

Humans like to think about all these grand questions! What am I here for! What do I do with my

life! What is the meaning of life!

So what? Does a stupid cosmic monster like you know the answer to these questions?

I do not care about the answer because it will all unravel eventually. You cannot be preoccupied with the present and future. Perhaps your boss can. Live long enough and you will discover the truth. Whether you agree with it however, I can count on a single one of our hands the total number of humans that accept it.

There are other humans with this knowledge?

Well, I suppose they're not human anymore.

Answer the question. The full question.

Yes, there are a few, less than five. I don't know what parts of the universe they lurk in, but I've heard telling of one on Earth. Although let it be known that I, Nyarlahotep, don't dirty myself with the deals of lesser beings. I am a God mind you. The messenger for the Great Old Ones. Their heart and soul!

Cute.

Cute?!

Whatever you were saying about the old ones or whatever. That's a lot of enthusiasm for what is essentially a messenger in the end.

I'm not cute!

The voice in my head starts listing off reasons about why it's actually really terrifying. Something about how I shouldn't even be alive or something for staring directly at her in my mind. How curious is that? I saw her in my dreams. She was taking the form of people I'd interacted with in the past. Although, there was one form she could never take. I wonder why I never saw her as Aion. I feel like I remember Aion better than I do myself. The last thing I did with her was fight and even back then during that I felt like I had been spirited away.

Hey. How do we leave?

Leave?

Leave.

Just exit at the front of the facility.

Which is where exactly?

Oh you can't miss it, there's only one hallway to travel through.

Where do I start then?

There's a door somewhere opposite of us. It'll be like that the whole way out. I'll leave it to you; I'm going to take a nap.

A nap?!

Oh right. You'll have to deal with the guy guarding you too!

A guard?!

I didn't receive an answer after that. I'm not even going to try and guess the logistics of what I was told. I pick myself up and travel across the room, hoping that I haven't been misled. Surely the voice in my head wouldn't lie to me…

The lab doors are flawless. For a thousand years old, they look like they've just been made. This place must not actually see much use since I've yet to encounter anybody else. This room is empty. Four pods are next to mine, I was the fifth. I didn't really check the others, but they look empty enough.

I follow the path as instructed, walking to the door opposite of me. It automatically opens up and blinds me with an amazing light. My eyes slowly adjust, and I'm left aghast, staring at something I never expected to see.

Everlong/1*

I grip my chest, it's in excruciating pain. Loss. This is the pain of loss. It's a filthy, disgusting, abhorrent feeling that pulls me into a dismal, depressing mood. She was in my hands. I had her damn it! She… I… always had her. I listened to her words. I know what she said was true, but I was too damned proud to admit my mistake!

And she has left me a hole in my heart. I have no idea where to go. No idea where to look. How far forward to search or how far back to investigate. She is in the hands of the void now.

I sink deeper and deeper into my bed, hoping something would come to light. That I'd realise or remember something. This is despair. This is what I had delivered to her and now the darkness delivers it to me. How incomprehensible that my heart feels so… so…

"Cheers Aion, you're all set! Right as rain!" I hear his voice from inside the medical pod. I've been awake for a single second and I'm already annoyed. A dream? Was that a dream?

The machine lifts its lid on its own and I can see him standing over at one of the computers in the room. I stay in the pod, staring up at the ceiling of the room, wondering if I should even get out. I have never felt this way before. In fact, I don't think I've ever felt such emotion touch my heart. Cassandra Watson, I lost to her. She's the reason I'm here. And I am the reason she is gone.

"You gonna lay in there all-day Aion? I figured you would have stormed out by now, scowling at me and telling me off haha." The only thing I want to do is gouge your eyes out you moron.

"Chrono please. Not as soon as I wake up." I lift myself up and stare around the room. I can't believe such a shady looking place actually functions as a recovery centre. This is more like a laboratory than anything else. It did start like that but having it repurposed into this medical bay left a lot to be desired. Well not like anyone uses this place. Chrono and I are pretty much the only

patients. My body is healed but I'm still hurt.

"Well it's only been a hundred years, what's a hundred more right?" He quips. A hundred years huh? I've taken naps longer than that. The real surprise here is this feeling. Emptiness.

She's gone. Something stole her away from me and I've been sleeping for a hundred years like I have nothing better to do! I feel outrageously bitter. I need to situate myself and find her, save her. I need her.

"I assume you went over the recordings in my facility, Chrono. I know what that intrusive black mass was but finding it…" Finding it would be another story. I know it doesn't exist in any capacity. A concept, a myth, a legend, no different from us. This creature though, it's definitely a nasty one.

"What interest does it have in Cassandra? We've been travelling side by side for years. Plus, it's smart. It didn't show up until I had no chance to retaliate. It was watching us, in our own facility. I'd like to know why, Chrono. You didn't spend 100 years here just waiting for me to wake up did you?" I press my head into my left hand, rubbing my brow, wondering where to even start. Not only did this thing show up at the End of Time, it entered my world. There are only two beings in this existence that can enter. Chrono and I are the only ones that can invite themselves in.

"I couldn't really say. We have no leads Aion so I…"

"What did you do Chrono! Explain! Now!" I shout, cutting him off.

"Well Aion… since it's from the void, we really have no leads. Can't interact with something that doesn't exist. So I contacted the one person who might be able to..."

"The priestess." I scoff at him.

"Yes. She was rather reluctant to at first but upon hearing Ms. Watson had gone missing her tune changed." He responds.

"And where are the records of this you snake!"

"You turned the system off during your fight Aion, it can't be helped. We made use of the time

machine and spent decades searching for a clue or hint. It's not on any official monitoring system. In fact, one girl on the team is still out on her own. When she returns the case will, close, so to speak. We ultimately decided that since The Monster got its target on the first try, we likely weren't to encounter it again. The only thing we could do was wait for you to wake up."

"Treason. This is treason against me Chrono. You have usurped my rule."

"It was for you, Aion. Believe me and believe in my actions. It was for you." My fist is tight, squeezing into my palm. Ironic, that I'm being a stickler for the rules now.

"Then where is she? Where did it take her?" I ask.

"We did find evidence of void energy moving into Erebus. Unfortunately, that's also where the trail ends." His voice sounds more reserved now.

"In the underworld. In the darkness of the underworld. She might be even further down." I reply with my thoughts.

"It is possible they went all the way to Tartarus." He answers

"Neither of you went to confirm? Did you ask, Eris? Surely she'd lend you passage on my behalf."

"Did you forget Aion? You helped lock most of the Ministry away with the AI. The ramifications of this being, it left many power voids in the universe. The underworld is too busy dealing with the fallout."

"I don't give a shit about the ramifications Chrono; I want to find Cassandra."

"Of course. I didn't mean to press. Shall we go pay The Underworld a visit?"

"No, I would prefer you to stay here and hold the fort, so to speak."

"Very well." He nods at me.

"There will be no power void here. Those idiots have had enough beauty sleep in Leng. I'll get them after I get Cass."

“Understood. Then, what’s your play, Aion?

“I want a moment. Collect my thoughts and clean myself up. Do you mind?”

“Ah right. I’ll stay here if you need me.”

“Thank you, Chrono.” He stands there dumbfounded, perhaps a surprising note to his ears. He was completely unable to recall the last time she spoke to him so kindly. He laughs as if I had told him a joke.

“What’s so funny Chrono?” Aion asks.

“Oh well, I’m just glad. Glad to be the first witness to your personality evolving beyond

:)

:|

:(

:0

Aion.” I stand frozen. Called out. Put on the spot and humiliated. But I will swallow my pride and deal with it.

This feeling has clawed at my heart since I’ve awoken. This burning sensation that sits in my chest begs for you. That cries for you. That screams out and makes my body burn with desire to hear your voice again. The gaze from your eyes that possessed me to return to their stare with my own. To feel your hand hold mine as we swing left to right. To hold you in my arms and carry you into my bed. The sweet of your kiss that my brain craves. The pleasure we inflict upon one another. There is no force that will prevent me from seeing you again. I will toss aside every ounce of pride that exists within me, to see you again. There is no part of heaven or hell I will not scorch to find you. Whatever it takes. How much I've loved you. That's how much I love you. How much I will love you. Forever and ever.

I want to hear you squeal my name as your nails claw into my sheets. As the bed grows messier and messier. As the blankets fall to the floor and the room warms. I want to feel your sweat drip

onto my face and make my makeup run. I want to dig my fangs into you and mark you as mine. I want to leave kiss marks over your body, head to toe. I want to slip between your flawless flower and rob it of its purity. I want you to know that you are mine. In the past life. In this life and if it kills me, into the next life. I will do whatever it takes.

“Ahahaha. So this is what living feels like. I can understand why she went so far now. I'm going to Earth.” I say as I wander over to him to check out what he’s doing.

“Earth? What do you need to do there? Figured you go back to your palace and yell at Hermes before leaving.” Should I be honest with him or lie? I’m not sure. I don’t think he cares about what I do.

“I feel like it, so what?” I respond.

“Furthermore, don’t you want to search for your missing partner?” I grit my teeth and glare at him. So stupid. I hate him. I want him to die.

“No! What, is this an interrogation? I just want to drink my head off for a bit. Is that ok? MOM?” I hate him so much but, he’ll fall for that, guaranteed.

“Right, right. Sorry. There was a summons for you by the Doctor but I’ll just tell them you had some work-related duties. They’ll probably want to see you soon though, on account of all that universe ending business but as you say…”

“Time is mine!” I declare to him and storm out of the lab. I can hear a faint, “See ya,” behind me. This wouldn’t have happened if I had used my real body. Although, maybe I would’ve died if I did use it. Food for thought I suppose. I just wanted to get the hell out of there and away from him. Now that there’s space between us I can jump to any point in time. I like that place I had in Japan, maybe I’ll go there. I think about the time period I existed there and close my eyes. With a snap of my finger I leave behind the hollow factory and revisit a more comfortable era. I shower, change into more fitting clothes. A pair of jeans pulled all the way up to my chest. I tuck in a beige turtleneck

sweater and wrap a belt around my waist. I throw on a fashionable black coat and head out, taking in this world she considered worthy.

I immediately find myself an old, empty bar. I take a seat at a booth and stare at the wall of alcohol and spirits gathered from various eras in human history. Why do they collect so much? I take another sip of my drink, I'm not sure how long I've been nursing it for. I set the glass down on a small coaster. Despite its ice-cold entrance within my mouth, it warms my insides, it even feels like they're burning. It allows me to shift my focus away from all the thoughts that have recently been plaguing my mind. I've calmed down.

"Hey, we're closing up shop soon miss. If you don't mind." A man's voice reminds me that I was sitting in this booth for who knows how long. Time just melded together for me. Normally, any people out this late are the real drunkards, losers, and troublemakers. I pull out some cash from my pocket and drop it on the table. I vanish away before the server returns to disturb my peace.

The outside world. Not too long ago I thought that I wouldn't need to make my gaze filthy with its sights and yet, here I am. Completely unable to detach myself from it. This era isn't too bad. Mostly peaceful and quiet…Why am I here instead of my own home? Why did I return to this city and wander it? What am I looking for? I don't know if I can find an answer that would please me. Despite my previous exclamations, I have returned to her world. I want to see her again.

It always rains in this country. I do like the atmosphere it creates. Fog settles in and hides most of the buildings from plain sight. The streetlights look like ghastly apparitions that terrorise the skies above me. Every so often the haunting smell of the sewers escapes, giving me a whiff of some horrid scents. But this is all human. Proof of their progress, as she had put it. Returning to Earth is bittersweet but, I wanted this. Right?

My haphazard walking crashes me into someone, she falls down on her bottom and I stare down at her. I'm not sure what face I was making but she didn't look upset. I extend my right arm out

towards her to help pull her up. She takes my hand, and it makes me feel emotional. This is the first person I've touched in a long, long time. Maybe that's a silly feeling but, I sort of understand now. Why I reached out for her, why she reached out for me. She takes her hand in mine and smiles at me as I pull her up. It's warm.

"Sorry didn't mean to knock you down. I wasn't paying attention and boom; I just knocked the prettiest girl in the city into a puddle on the ground."

"Knocked the prettiest girl in the city onto the ground? I feel as though I let the prettiest girl in the city just pick me up." She replies to me and confuses me for a moment before I realise what's going on here.

"Oh, I see. Sorry, I must have misheard you. I haven't been here in a while; my Japanese is a little rusty." She covers her mouth to laugh. I laugh with her and bow my head a little.

"I'm Aion, not exactly new here but you know, out and about now."

"Aion? You're up so late. Are you a night owl or do you still think you're in your old timezone?" She asks me curiously. If anything, I'm curious as to why I've run into, literally into, the only other person up and out on this street. A different time zone huh? I suppose that is true but they all meld into one flow for me so, I've never noticed. Oh well I can humour her a bit.

"Aha, I guess I'm still stuck in another time zone. Flights can take so long, and you know, you arrive at night, but your body feels like it's daytime. It's a real mess." She nods in agreement with me and smiles.

"Well Aion, welcome to Tokyo. I'm Junko. A pleasure to meet you. Do you have somewhere to stay for the night? A hotel or something?" Junko. I like that name. I don't know why but I like it.

"Yeah, I have a place of my own. Something I bought for when I visit is all." She leans her head towards me and smiles.

"Maybe you can make it up to me with a towel and a warm drink?" She winks at me and takes

my hand.

“Well, I don’t mind at all Junko. You’ll have to let me lead the way.” I pull her hand with mine and start my journey back home. She giggles quietly and walks beside me. I think I feel, normal. Human. I’m not a God at the moment, I’m just living in it.

Creeping Silence/3

Beyond the blinding light that crashes into my face, a hollow, metal world outfits the room. I can hear the creaking noises of metal laid upon metal as I take everything in. To the left of me, a massive metal construct sits in the centre of the even larger room. Both the left and right sides have it a distinct shape to them, it has a curious form for a bunch of metal. It looks like there's some sort of massive screen on it. How weird but I'm curious by nature so of course I'm going to get a closer look. The path from the door goes straight across to a door opposite of it, save for a single divergence. A bridge leads out from the walkway and to the centre where the mechanical menagerie is. In fact, it looks like there's a little counter right in front of the metallic monster. I step forwards into the steel cranium.

Each individual step reverbs and echos across the room and back to me. Kassandra mentioned a guard or something like that ahead, but it looks clear so far. Was that just to creep me out or was it a genuine warning?

As I step deeper into the new room, I make my way to the bridge in the middle of the walkway. The size of the metal monstrosity begins to dawn on me. What is this thing used for? Who made it and why? The person who can answer me is gone now. It went to… sleep… inside my head. I tap my right foot on the bridge, making sure it was at least somewhat safe to walk on. It seems stable enough so I press down on my foot with my weight, seeing if it will pass the second Watson test. Wait, if I fall, I could just turn back time. Why am I so worried?

A few steps in prove the bridge is stable. I'm not exactly sure how it held itself up, but it held my foot, and everything attached to that foot. There are guard rails on the sides of the bridge, they're extremely cold to the touch. Now that I think about it, this entire area is cold. I hadn't noticed until

now either. Maybe it's just my body still waking up. I slept for a thousand years. In fact, maybe I shouldn't be moving at all. I just hit the ground running as soon as I woke up.

Everything that's happened, I haven't given it any thought at all. If anything, it's a bit whimsical. I'm usually the one solving the mystery, not the victim. Now, who will come to save me? I'm stuck here in a horrifying situation. I've been abducted for a millennia and there's a second voice in my head and I'm… excited.

As I reach the end of the bridge I can now see that this counter is more like a desk. A computer sits on top of it. I assume computers haven't changed much so hopefully I can get this thing to work. Let's see. How convenient, English remains a language here. The greater monitor sitting on the greater machine mirrors the smaller monitor I'm on. Strange design. A single folder sits on the desktop

Origin AI

I double click it to open it up and stare at a wall of icons and jpgs that don't clue me in on anything. Normally, I'd click on things until something happens but that's probably a horrible idea. Then it dawns on me; horrible ideas are my specialty. This isn't any different. I can't learn anything if I don't investigate. I click on things that look interesting, seeing what pops up. The reality is, hardly any of them open up to something interesting. Code, code, code, more lines of code and code. I don't really get any of this. After unsuccessfully scrolling for too long, a couple of things finally catch my eye. I can't glance at both unfortunately. Wait, I can just pause time. I'm a time traveller! Why have I not been doing any time travelling? I reach around for my watch but I'm not in my regular outfit. I don't have pockets or my coat on. It's not hanging off of a chain either. I turn to my backside as best I can and check. It's not on me. Ugh, what am I doing. In the corner or my eye, however, I see the shadow of a person standing at the distant doorway that supposedly is the way out.

Simultaneously, a document for something just pops up on screen. I wouldn't call the random clicking a resounding success, but I've got something tangible now. Ok, I'll try as best as I can to remember this.

"START [11:48 AM]

Cassandra can only remain in the past for a set amount of time. In the past, her form is corporeal and may appear out of place in certain eras. Cassandra can freeze the present time at her will, but it can be overridden by a more powerful user such as, Aion. Each time Cassandra pauses time, the longer she must wait to unpause it. Cassandra has no restrictions on future time travel because she does not exist yet. Thus she is simply answering a summons request created via Aion. (edited)

[11:49 AM]

Cassandra cannot explicitly interact with things in the past nor future. She can only suggest interaction. This is a safeguard to prevent splits in time. I.E., Cassandra gathers evidence and data for Aion. If needed, Cassandra will be given authority to act as a real identity by Aion. (edited)

[11:50 AM]

Aion has total control of time and space. Aion can assume two forms. The forms are not codependent upon one another. First, is her real form. The Goddess Aion herself. The second is a modified, bio-engineered android body. It uses the template of the God Chronos as her base, combined with later interpretations.

[11:51 AM]

Aion's job is to keep safeguards in place to prevent anomalies from disrupting any flow of time.

[11:51 AM] cont.

Aion is also the greatest rule breaker and subsumed her position to end the universe.

Cassandra is the counter force to this. Who sent her, however, is a mystery. (edited)

[11:51 AM] cont.

Cassandra is Aion's assistant because of similar skills and convenience. Cassandra's analytical ability is unparalleled. She picks things up quicker than Aion will give her credit for. She is regardless, only given the lesser duties. (edited)

[11:52 AM]

I.E., unsolvable crimes on behalf of authorities of cosmic entity interference.

— Today at 11:58 AM

Aion is the only one permitted for head on interactions with greater foes. This includes cosmic terrors and monsters.

[12:02 PM]

You are not permitted to interact with Aion, should she recover from her wound quick enough to save Cassandra. She will blaze a path of destruction to recover her beloved. (edited)

[12:04 PM]

Your priority is to steal Cassandra's body and return it to my lab. This will supply us with the final test subject for a human hybrid. You will possess this body and attempt to harness the flow of time on your own.

— Today at 12:05 PM

Think of yourself as the 4th leaf clover and bring us some luck.

[12:07 PM]

When she is here you will induce her into a state of eternal dreams. I want you to study her manner of speech, style, quirks, analytical method, and decision operations. Ergo, you will visit these dreams of hers to become her. A perfect duplicate.

[12:08 PM]

Could you do this for me, Nyarlathotep?

[12:09 PM]

I don’t need all the dream folly doctor; I only need her face!

— Today at 12:13 PM

To accurately receive critical, independent, and well thought out decision making in a variety of stress inducing situations, this data must be recorded. I must find the perimeters at which human choice is solved and only within the dreams will I find that data. You get me my dream diary, so to speak, and you may do whatever you desire with her body, my creepy chaotic consort.

END

33° 42′ 0″ S, 163° 30′ 0″ E (-33.7°, 163.5°)”

What on Earth is this?! This is extremely personal information about Aion and I. Why is there a chat log of it? Who is it from? And who is it for? This is dangerous.

I rub my forehead and sigh heavily. This is bad, really bad. Someone has been watching us. Extremely carefully at that. I have to get out of here but I also need to discover where here is. I peek my head over my right shoulder and glance at the door again.

Fortunately, it seems the apparition is patient. Patient enough to let me stare at this for a few moments longer. I turn around and stare at the door that supposedly grants me freedom from this place.

I could’ve sworn I saw a figure there. The unmistakable white sclera of a creature staring at me without my knowledge. Oh it’s her. That perfect woman and her perfect smile. Why am I thinking of her?

This room is extremely well lit, nothing here could be hidden. It’s completely barren at that. Save for the giant machine and this computer. I never thought of her like that in the dreams. Why am I thinking about her now? I guess the only thing to do now is to search. Why aren't I afraid?

The return trip down the bridge is thrilling. I feel excited. Will this be a chance to speak to another person or is it something more? I wasn’t particularly calm before, but I'm so restless now.

Am I happy at the possibility of having contact with another human? Or is it even human? Maybe it's an alien. Another one of these cosmic things? Or am I the alien? I have this… thing… in my head. Perhaps I'm the monster to whatever is here.

My loud steps crash into the metal flooring. I could be alerting everyone in this place, but I'm not worried about that. I want to have some sort of contact with someone. If the worst comes to, I'll freeze time and run for it. As I step in front of the door, it automatically opens for me. The room that now lays bare before my eyes looks decently more familiar than the previous two. The dim, blue hue of a computer screen illuminates what appears to be an office. A blinking cursor at the end of a series of code on a computer screen stands out to me. Someone was working on this. It has to be at least somewhat recently too. Is this the room I was told about? Maybe there are dates, records, documents, something on this machine to tell me more. I wonder if they still run Bindows too… There's a mouse and keyboard so I can still use this thing.

I can't make much out from the lines of code. I've finally found my one weakness, data literacy. If I could copy it and move it somewhere I would but I have no means of doing so. I'm fortunate that the computer operates similarly to ones I'm familiar with. Close, maximise and minimise. Hitting minimise brings me to the desktop, it looks like a photo taken of a desert at night. It's flat, empty and I bet a little cold.

A lone folder named "Project AI" sits in the top left corner of the barren wastes. I double click it and it opens up to hundreds, if not more, files and documents. I suppose you wouldn't need to hide your work at work. It's an odd feeling, finding all the evidence out in the open.

I scroll and scroll, looking for something I can make sense of as well as try to remember. I suddenly remember what looked like coordinates earlier on that other computer. That would be useful but there's no way for me to remember that. In the sea of manila folders, the file name *"New Age,"* stands out to me. I stop my scrolling and double click on it. It doesn't look very long, maybe

a diary entry or something along those lines.

“Everyone thought with the mastering of AI, Artificial Intelligence, that this was the peak of human progress. That a creation so paramount in utility it could reduce, enhance, and perfect human error. However, I have taken it one step further. This wouldn’t be a comical Chinese room with access to the internet. No matter how amazing AI could be, it’s always going to be held back by something. A fixed, material constraint, such as a server, desktop, laptop, or phone. Like being stuck in an unbreakable box. That would be the limiter to AI, one that it could not survive without. The solution to that issue is to remove that box. I suppose removing the box isn’t quite right. I moved the box. Instead of requiring your everyday computer, it survives without it. Made in the image of man, the AI “brain” works similarly to our own. Our consciousness, the voice in our head, the centre of our memories and emotions. After testing, I have discovered how to move that box. The box is far, far away from the world. I named it Alpha Omega, the beginning, and the end. The God of AI.

Although we are not sure how our own thought process works, I have given Alpha Omega their own. A quantum computer to which every AI reports. Electric signals are sent to the computer and a response is computed. Ironic, a method for thinking has been discovered for another creation, long before we will discover our own. Although, that’s also an area I have been assigned to. I think what I must do is not discover our own brain process but to move it, give it to the AI. To have them mimic it.

I will upload our own minds as data, no different than a computer program. To back it up, so to speak, it is no different than backing up your work. When I gain control of the human mind I will have also indulged in great sin. I do not fear bearing that burden. I will let chaos reign. Accelerate the end. I must. Far removed from the boundaries of life and death. A phantasm designed to fool everyone. I have the perfect candidate in mind. I will enlist every resource at my disposal to find her. I want to use her, partially for my own personal benefit. I will search for you to infinity and

beyond, Chrononaut. And when I find you, I will finally be able to fix everything."

Chrononaut…I was called that earlier. This thing in my head was working for or with someone and that someone is a part of all this. Whatever all this is. I still highly object to something else taking a nap in my head but, what can I even do about that?

Ok, so is this the computer? No, the big metal mountain in the previous room! That must be the AI, the quantum computer! In jubilation, I stand up in excitement. I've discovered something! I can't wait to tell…

"Oh, was there something else you needed?" A voice? A male voice? Someone's behind me. The pair of eyes I spied a bit ago? Play it cool Watson, this conversation doesn't need to turn into a fight.

"Something else?" I respond in turn, while slowly turning around to face whoever's behind me. The document on the PC is still open, I can't hide what I've been doing.

"I noticed you are still here. Enjoying the marvels of the doctor's discovery huh? Didn't think he was capable of it when you brought that corpse you're walking around in at first I bet!" I get a look at who I'm speaking to, I can feel my stomach drop. It's a sickly feeling, the same face, eyes, hair colour. He is the spitting image of her. I swallow my spit and close my fists in a ball. I need to stay calm. We're not enemies.

"I assume you can recall where the exit is, although, if you have her body now you could do anything you wanted, right? The power of time travel in your hands, all that cosmic magic, my end of the bargain has been fulfilled. You get her body. I got my AI. Thanks for your cooperation." He says. I'm still in shock from his looks but I need to say something to continue concealing my presence. God why now?! I can't think of anything! What would an evil me say? What would I do? I'm panicking! Ok whatever, I clear my throat and begin to speak.

"I was just curious about the state of things. It seems to have taken quite a long time to fully rob her of her mind." It was a thousand years right? That's what I… she… ugh said? Wait how did she

know that? Is it weird if I know that?

“Well the complexities of the human mind and all that. I’m sure her mental prowess was especially high, having to keep up with Aion and all that time travel business.” Aion! Why does he look like her!? She’s one of a kind.

“Ah, is that what has you worried? Well everything worked out in the end, after all, I’m here now. In fact, Aion was here not too long ago. You just missed her.” He says.

Aion was here! Then maybe we can work together! Would she work with me? She would. I’m pretty sure she… would. Right?! She reached out for me in the end, she called out my name. No, he wouldn’t expect me to work with her, much less even know her. Tangentially at best. Aion and the monster shouldn’t be on terms at all, why did he bring it up? Do I look worried?

“Aion was here? What for?” I raise my eyebrow curiously. If I’m engaged maybe I’ll look more convincing. At least I hope so.

“Oh, she was in the repair bay. A real nasty punch that detective laid into her earlier. Some hidden potential in that body. Be wise Nyarlathotep, or I guess it’s Watson now, right?” He smiles at me, like I need reassurance. I’m the wrench in their plans. But he said things worked out in the end. So they’re not concerned about me at all anymore. This is good, I can try probing him for a little more information.

“Did Aion mention going anywhere or is she still lurking around and about?”

“No, she made no mention of where she was going. I have a sneaking suspicion that she is looking for you though!” If Aion left then I’m on my own… sort of. I look beyond the man at the door behind him. I can assume that’s the exit. The door I came from is on my right. It’s probably automatic as well. That’s likely why I didn’t hear him enter.

“So, just you here on guard duty huh?” Although I was told there was guard here, this guy has done nothing to make me assume as much. Besides looking like Aion, he doesn’t seem to be hostile

in any way. He's significantly less boastful and proud too. I might actually just stroll on out of here. I think I kinda just showed up at the right time.

"Yeah. I was waiting for you to wake up, make sure the process worked out in the end. The deal is still on correct?" Deal, a gap in my knowledge. But Kassandra had said she doesn't make deals with lesser beings. This guy must not only look like Aion but be of equal status too. Does Aion have a family? Maybe she kept it hidden for some reason. And she was here earlier too. I guess I didn't know as much about her as I thought. Well, I guess I can just answer the man and leave, I have a suspiciously bad feeling about all of this. Not that I didn't before but I've landed a golden opportunity, best not to get greedy.

"Of course. If you don't mind, I'll be on my way." I stare at him confidently. In fact, I don't think a cosmic monster would be much for manners, so I simply and plainly stare at him. He raises a forced smile and bows his head a little.

"No, not at all. You're free to do as you please, as long as it is outside of Leng." I nod my head in return. Leng, another thing I've not heard of before. The universe is growing so much before my eyes. I didn't spend much time in the future, so it's all a mystery to me.

"Farewell." I start walking towards him and he keeps the smile on his face.

"Oh! Why not take the time travellers body for a spin? You can go to any point in spacetime you know. This lab is such a long walk from the rest of the facility."

"What does it matter to you?" I reply cool and uncaring, I can't believe this is where he presses me for something.

"I just want to make sure the product works! There's a strict no refund policy!" What a ridiculous answer. Who is he fooling? I've heard my watch functioned more like training wheels, but I've been out of commission for a millennia. Should I lie? Maybe something about the body not fully adjusting yet… I don't have anything else so let's give it a shot.

“Believe me, I had tried as soon as I had woken up. It seems like I need a bit more time to fully take ownership of her.” Did that sound weird? My mind is getting so tired, I can’t think very well. Hopefully he buys into it and just leaves me alone.

“More time? I wasn’t aware of this discrepancy. No where in the interview did you mention having any body issues when you took control.” Of course, the perfect body snatcher. Ok. What else can I say or do? Ignore it, I don’t need to convince him of anything if he’s already convinced.

“I wasn’t either. Now I am. Farewell.” He looks at me with a surprised face. Why does he seem shocked?

“Right. Didn’t mean to keep you any longer than needed. See you around, Cass.” Cass… Cass… I can hear a laugh under his breath. He bows, walking away from the door for me. I take a moment to stare at him, he’s unrealistically handsome. He really is a male Aion. He could be her brother. An exceptionally good-looking suit, vest, dress pants, the works. He must be fairly muscular as well; I can see parts of his suit get stretched along his biceps when he lifts his arms. That same fair porcelain skin. The ghostly white hair. Oh there’s a small difference, his hair has a very slight blue hue to it. I wonder if it’s the remnants of his hair colour. If it’s natural, I’m very curious as to how. His face is a little more chiseled than Aion’s but it’s like looking at a gender swap. That smile. It couldn’t belong to anybody but her. I need to find out one more thing, then I’ll leave. I’ll ask it like some cool villain, it’ll be like I don’t really care but there’s a little bit of interest.

“What’s your name again, boy?”

“My name? Oh, I don’t believe I’ve ever told you. In fact, I’m shocked you even want to know.” I raise my hands and shrug at him.

“Right well, you don’t need to tell me.” I start walking towards the door to freedom with my left arm extending out, reaching for the doorknob. A doorknob? Out of all the doors here, this is the only manual one? I hear him clear his throat, he’s standing in place, still waiting for me to leave. The

sound of metal crashing into metal enters my head and drops me full of surprise.

Nonstop/4

I'm awake. What? Why? The air is chilling me to the bone. What's this girl doing? I look to my sides and recognise that this is the treatment pod. This is getting annoying, how many times will I go through with this? What happened? Did the guard boy beat her?

I leap out of the pod, which oddly, is already open. Or perhaps it was never closed. Clothed. Shoes on. I open and close my hands, stretching them before stepping towards the exit of the medical bay. I'm in control, that means she lost right? The blinding lights assault my eyes as the door to the mainframe opens. A most interesting trail of red runs along the floor into the room behind me. Yeah, she definitely lost. I wonder how…

I reach the other side, but the door doesn't automatically open. I look over at the computer's brain, nothing looks different. Did I get locked in? No more wasting time, I need to get out. Wait…I need to?

I ball my hand into a fist once more and destroy the uncooperative door. The metallic gatekeeper flies into the other room, crashing into the wall. Up jumps someone from a chair in the room and he wears an expression of shock when I look at his face.

"C-Cassandra? You're back!" He says flabbergasted.

"I'm not Cassandra you moron. What's going on? Explain the situation to me."

"Right, as you… she…was getting ready to exit, I had my sword greet the back of her neck all the way through."

"A sword? How'd you pull that on her?

"This is the one door with a knob. She didn't think of it in time I suppose." *Morbid but I did warn her…*

"I hope the healing method works out fine, it was sickening to look at but whatever. Your body did eventually glue your head back on.

"The body will be fine. Better in fact when I get my hands on something to eat, which brings me to my next point." I stare him down and build a quaint smile for him to stare back at.

"Be a good boy?"

"Ah, right. Give me a moment please." *He removes his coat and pulls up the sleeves of his shirt. He turns his palm upward and his cool bare skin shines underneath the light of the room. Several bite marks are already on his arm.*

"Lift." He complies, raising his arm to my mouth. A quick bite will fulfil the illusion. I grip the meaty appendage on both ends, searching for an ideal spot to delve into. A bright blue vein calls to me, free of any previous feeding session. I sink my teeth into his flesh, he grunts under the pain. The flood of warmth enters my mouth. My head gets lighter. That's perfect. I can feel it over flow and pour out of my mouth. That's going to make a mess of things below.

"There, that should be good enough." *He speaks up. I pull away.*

"Very good boy." I smirk at him. He quickly patches up the wound. He hands me a cloth to wipe the stains off of myself. I do as much and toss the cloth back at him. He catches it and waves at me.

"Always a pain, these bites. Time can't turn back on them." *I turn around and wave the back of my hand at him. Now we can leave with greater ease than my previous owner did. That stupid girl didn't heed my warning and she paid the price. This body is mine now!*

Stupid?! What do you mean stupid?! Your body?!

What? You weren't convincing in the slightest. Did you see how his demeanour changed? I demanded respect from him, and he gave it willingly.

That was disgusting. You drank blood with my body. What the fuck?

I'm a literal monster Cassandra.

How does that fix our, no, my head!?

I'll just replace its parts with yours. Like putting a cap back onto a bottle lid.

I don't like having my body compared with the likes of machines and objects as if I've become one. I'm me, human.

Stop whining. We needed to do that.

I should've brought Aion here! Messed with time a lot! She would have noticed it and come looking for me! And when she saw what happened here, you and that weird guy would both be dead! And she would've reversed time on my wounds and-

If you could've brought Aion here you would've done it by now. You're bluffing. Since you're against the idea of drinking blood, next time you could just walk around headless. That would be fun to watch. Not funny? I thought it was a little funny.

What is wrong with you? No, what is wrong with me?

Oh, just as a, heads up, I'm not sure if you'll survive in the environment outside.

Nice joke.

That one wasn't a joke. This facility isn't housed on Earth. It's an Earth-like environment but that's about it.

It's not on Earth? Where is it? How is it Earth-like?

You'll see.

She couldn't have prepared me in any way, shape, or form for what I was looking at. It was a city in the sky encased in something clear, like glass. No not Earth's sky… the Earth was in my field of vision. This is unbelievable. It is unmistakable. It is undeniable. We're in space. Not far, far away in the darkness of the unknown kind of space. This is the moon. Earth's moon.

I'll give a brief explanation. There are 22 seas on the moon. And no, they're not literally bodies of water, it's just the standard naming protocol for them.

So which one are we in?

One that doesn't exist.

It doesn't exist? What do you mean?

It's an illusion. There's a single photo out there of it, but that's only because those idiots that run Ardor let the magic fade for a moment.

What? Ok, so where are we?

Mare Desiderii.

Mare? As in sea? A sea on the moon?

What did I just say? Anyways, for us, it exists, but it doesn't exist in an official capacity anywhere else. The humans named it that and I guess the residents of Ardor liked the name.

Ardor, the city hidden away in a sea of desire. I guess I can see why. After managing our way out of the final corridor of the lab I get a breath of "fresh" air and can finally look at light that isn't artificial. This is pure light right? Light that isn't diluted by Earth's atmosphere? My picky questions will have to wait, however, as to my further surprise, the cage I leave opens up to an even larger box. The lab is seated in a lone lake of pink hued light. Water pours in from all four sides of the box. I'm not sure what magic is capable of crafting this but it's as beautiful as it is off-putting. Far off in the distance, directly opposite the front of the labs entrance is something bright. Something really bright. As much as I want to stare at the marvels of what I'm witnessing, I'm not the one in control of my body. She's walking towards something, maybe she'll make her way towards the something bright that I noticed.

"Where are we going?" I ask. I can't complain, I'm not dead after all. But it is a very disturbing out of body experience while not actually being out of body. It's like I'm staring at myself in third person.

"I'm going to kill a god." A very normal and understandable response. She crouches down to the

water surrounding the lab. It's the water that is an extremely odd shade of pink. Why pink? For kilometres around us there is nothing but water. It's peaceful, serene, a total contrast compared to what we had just left. Her… my head looks up. We're under a ceiling! It just gets more and more bizarre!

"What is that up above? Why are there gaps in the sky?"

"It's a map of every Celestial city. We are near Ardor. That's the one land mass in the south-east. But I have no time to gawk, I need to find someone." Without delay she leaps into the air, towards the giant wall of water. I can only watch as I feel my body move through the air, it's a crazy feeling.

"Who are we looking for?"

"The real archivist."

"The real archivist?"

"You should be very familiar with her. She works in that south-east area. I would prefer to reach her before the weather changes."

"No… You don't mean…"

"Quiet. Let me take us there. Save your qualms for when they can be taken care of." She floats upwards, over the water, slipping into the entrance where the flow is originating from. We delve deeper into the entrance until it becomes our exit. I can hardly believe the view on the outside. Not that I was believing the view on the inside either. It's a giant artificial box just floating out in the open made with who knows what kind of material. It's magical and whimsical and terrifying. This is just how things are going to be for awhile I suppose.

Blue skies, clouds, the sound of the wind. It's interesting the atmosphere is similar to the one on Earth. Is that intentional? We turn around to look back and start floating away. I can't make sense of it, I know it looks wrong but…

"This is a false lab. A front, it protects the way to the real one. Just look at this place, over

designed and hideous to look at." It was like staring into glass. Coloured glass. That's why it all appeared pink inside. Far off into the distance, I see the building we had left. The false lab.

Surrounding it was a massive, absolutely insanely, intricately designed castle. No not a normal castle of course, it's reverse castle. Or is it upside down? Or are these the same thing? Either way, it's hard to make sense of. The base of it is in the sky and it travels downwards, towards the ground. And it's here! Floating in mid air! Incredible. Amazing. The view starts to shrink as we float away from it, a new object comes into view.

Extending from out of the reverse castle is a bridge at the top. Or is it the bottom... The bridge is bright, reflecting all of the light in the sky off of it. I can feel the air get cooler the closer we get. Yet more and more is happening that defies everything I know about common sense. Not that I have a lot left being a time traveller but this, I have nothing but shock. Is this magic or what?

"Noisy."

"What?"

"You're so noisy. Does that brain of yours ever stop?"

"Oh, well maybe activity was backed up for a thousand years and it needs to be output now!"

"You are very disagreeable."

"I'm disagreeable? You're the body thief! It's my head, this is where I think! Get the hell out of my head then!" I don't care if you're receiving my thoughts but at least let me articulate myself in my own damn head. You were just explaining a few moment ago, what changed?

I'm returned silence, which is the most I could ask for. We touch down on the nearly see through bridge that previously had my attention. I feel my feet slowly become swallowed by the freezing feeling below them. Is this ice? The atmosphere here is significantly colder than the air anywhere else. The cause for my wonderment is something simple. Simple but defies all logic. How this bridge of ice extends out into the sky, I had no idea. No way to explain it. Be it science or magic,

this is amazing.

"The bridge between science and magic shrinks if you go on long enough." My voice responds to my question with significantly less annoyance this time. Despite be something of a magic user myself, I know shockingly little about it. To add to that, my experience in technology is certainly primitive. Considering the lab I had come from, the technology is far removed from what I know.

"It's also been a thousand years stupid."

"You are so… right. It has been a thousand years, please, tell me more."

"Hmph, about time you put some humility in your words. Very well, I shall teach you more." I feel my face stretch, am I smiling?

"It is indeed magic that holds up this shabby bridge of ice. It goes on and on, beyond the horizon into Ardor proper. Here we will find the one I am looking for." My hand runs over my face and I stare down the bridge. Interestingly enough, there are shadows on the left side of the bridge. So there's a sun here, or an equivalent source of light. Which also means there might also be some sort of time flow. If that's the case… maybe Aion can come help me. Aion… my heart aches for her.

"You weren't kidding about the bridge going on and on, the sun, if that's a sun, is setting now. How do you think it will take to cross it?" I look into the sky and spy the sun crouching down into the horizon beyond the edge of the world.

"When we reach a split in the path, I estimate it's 25% of the way there. To make it simple for you, we will watch the sun set 4 more times before reaching our destination."

"Four?! That's an astronomical amount distance to cover? Why can't you just do the floaty thing the whole way there?"

"I have already given you control back. I quite dislike the cold."

"Wh-what? When? When did I?" Under this realisation, I'm looking at my arms, moving them again with my own thoughts and not theirs.

"You're welcome by the way."

"What? No, it's my own body, why would I show you gratitude for that? You're here because you lost. Why can't you just fly there? I'm going to get frostbite walking on this thing for four or five days."

"I can not work in the cold. I simply can't. Furthermore, I would like to rest."

"What?! You can't work in the cold? What are you a bear in winter? And I have several questions for that second part you said."

"I do not like it. What is so hard to believe about that?"

"So what do I need to tame you, an Air Conditioner at home?"

"You shall use no such thing!"

"It gets hot in the summer you know…" We both keep our silence or at least the equivalent of silence as I tread down the frozen path. Outside of the one guy in the lab… castle… place, it's been barren. It's silent, there are no more sounds of life around us.

"Hey, can you die? Like… die, die?"

"That would depend on what you consider death. You for instance, have been missing from all of your friends for a thousand years. To them you may very well be dead and yet here you are, walking across the sky to Ardor."

"I… still exist. I'm still a living creature. I'm me."

"How much of you is, you? Especially when you take into consideration that I am now you."

"Well they know I left, that I..."

"You went against Althea's wishes. I know, I was there after all. Every moment of your life, I have studied in your dreams. I would have been a better you than you!"

"I did break my promise to her but I didn't die. I'm not dead." The air around us drops further in temperature. Our conversation sends the sun off for the night. A few glances over the edges of the

bridge shows me that far below us is water. Water as far as the eye can see. We were on a bridge over an ocean, travelling to god knows where.

"We can hypothesise your bodily ship of Theseus later. Right now however, I want you to take note of this. We're coming up on the split in the road." My attention focuses on my sight, my brain still disturbed by what I'm going through. The voice's words are true though, a massive split ran to the right and to the left of our route with some sort of marker standing in the middle of it.

"A Choice May Lead to Salvation" That's what's on the sign here.

"Take the left turn here. The right is a nasty trick."

"And how do you know that?"

"Because I've seen it. Now go left, make your way to the very end of this road." Just make my way to the end. Sure. Just three or more days right? No big deal. I stare down at my boots, certainly not winter boots but it beats touching the cold directly. Beyond the sight of my boots, far below are lights. It feel like I'm staring down at a city although, my sight's a little blurry. No it's not my sight, it was the world below me. It's under the water. But how's that possible?

"A quick route to Atlantis. Your little hideout with the others."

"Atlantis? How's that possible? You can't trace the location of the city. Only Daphne can find it."

"It's not tracing the city of anything like that, it's a portal directly to the city. You have jump down into it though."

"A portal to the city… kinda like what Althea did for me..."

"Right well, don't go thinking you can escape down there. You don't have the authority to use it. Follow the path."

"Authority to use it? What does that mean?"

"Follow the path, you can ask about getting authority later. Fortunately, you have a jacket on." Follow the path that goes on for who know how long, to see who knows what for a reason I don't

know. Jacket?

“Keep it down up there, I'm going to rest now.”

“Rest? What the hell do you mean rest? Like a cat nap in my head?” An answer never returns, unfortunate. Well, it seems I'm on my own now. I can't believe it, a portal to Atlantis, here. Why did they make one? How did they make one? The reality of a thousand years passing starts to settle within me. I can't help but want to take a leap of faith down but I don't have the authority. Whatever that means.

Take the road to the left, that's all I know. Maybe I should turn back, return to that male Aion. How would I get back up though? It was my body that leaped into the air and I've certainly never been able to fly. If there was a way, I'd do it but hell, if anything I'm still sleeping and this is a dream. Maybe if I try freezing time, Aion will find me. If Aion shows up and notices this psycho is in my head or even worse, they’re the one in control… She might not want me anymore…

What will I find at the end of the path? Thinking about it does get me curious. And I can use this time to collect all my thoughts. My feet press into the magical ice and I step further into the unknown beyond. It wasn't long before the familiar smell of petrichor and it’s accompanying sound enter my head. Out here in the middle of the sky, rain beginning to pour down on me. It was a little odd but it's comforting to hear. I never really thought about it before but this sound is proof I’m alive. After everything with Aion and being locked away for so long, I'm alive.

Being lost in sentimental thought wouldn't last long however as my stomach begins to growl. It’ll be my first meal in a millennia. This is going to be an issue. They never made mention of any food. While sleeping maybe I was given nutrients through an IV bag. I didn't see anything of the sort when I woke up, or at least I don't recall any. A thousand years… and I'm lost beyond all belief. The only thing I can do is move forward. If things get really bad, summon Aion. Things are really bad though. The further I walk the dimmer the lights of the city down below get. I'm making progress,

albeit slowly. If anything the rain might be a bad thing now. I wonder if I'll catch a cold. That would be fun. Can this thing inside me suffer from the symptoms of a cold the same as I?

My pained steps stubbornly push on for kilometres. My feet are going to ache like crazy when this is done. The rain hasn't let up at all, in fact it feels like it's crashing down even harder. And this path just runs on and on. This whole situation sucks. I escaped one cage only to be sent to another. Should I be thankful that I'm alive? Alive with concessions. If I do try to stop time, what happens? I could use it as an opportunity to stop the rain and call Aion. She would show up for me, right? Well, the only way to figure out is to do it. Ah, my watch. Right. She stabbed right through it when trying to kill me. I dig into my pockets trying to look for it, I don't remember what happened to it. I leapt into the end of time with it. She thinks snapping her fingers is cool. It is cool. Ok, here goes. With the snap of my fingers I say, “freeze.”

The rain pauses with my words. It feels heavy on my chest, I need to catch my breath. I don't think I had sufficient mana for that cast but, it was worth trying out. Aion, where are you? I try to feel for her presence but I find nothing. What does it mean? That I can't find her? Aion?

Maybe this is the end of time? No, the rain stopped which means the flow stopped. So, there’s a flow. Although, Aion manipulated time at the end. Well, she's also a God. The God of Time. Not unusual that she has complete and total control of it.

Oh, what's this. I can sense the presence of someone, somewhere down the path. The person feels like Aion. It's not as strong but someone is there. Another time traveller? Another God? It reminds me a bit of Aion. You just said that Cass, get it together man. Even after everything, I can't get over her. I still get butterflies thinking about her.

The rainfall resumes, I guess I can’t pause time for long. I need more time. Hilarious, I, a time traveler, need time. How long was that? I wasn't paying attention. Oh well. I did learn something and I am curious to see what awaits at the end of the path now. Please mysterious person at the end

of the path, have a bed and food. I return to walking down the path, I feel somewhat more confident but it's still ridiculous. This thing in my head can fly and chooses to go sleep instead. I suppose the upside to that is I have my thoughts to myself for now.

Every step, every pitter patter of rain that falls is the only sound I've heard in who knows how long. I can't even tell if the sun is up or not because of these endless storm clouds. I suppose it's still down, light would push through a little if the sun were up. Ah, but I guess that's how it works on Earth. I have no idea if it works like that here in a hidden, magical, sea on the moon. It's starting to feel normal to me though. This bridge itself defies logic but the most shocking thing about it now is that the surface isn't slippery from all the water. In the distance ahead I can make out some sort of building. Well maybe I'm ahead of schedule. I've done nothing but walk. I can feel my feet swelling in my boots. They're starting to hurt. I can feel my mind and body tire as well. Hopefully whatever is up there will allow me inside. It's just a giant triangle that's sitting in the middle of the sky.

I continue on, making my way to what I believe is a domicile. I'm dying to get inside and rest. Oh, I hadn't thought about this yet but what if that *thing* tries to take my body while I sleep? What a horrid thought. That I'm not in control of myself when my eyes shut. It is cold and for whatever reason they did mention they don't like the cold. Maybe I'll be safe the entire way down the path.

The cold slowly gets an upgrade as the endless trail begins to see snow. One step forward is snowy, one step back is rainy. Two types of weather sitting right next to each other like this, it's pretty cool. I'd stick around and investigate the phenomena more if I wasn't so cold and hungry. Man this sucks. I can see the building a fair bit better now, not so far off anymore. Although the switch from the rain to snow while being drenched in water doesn't sound good. I need to reach that building before I really freeze. It hurts to just stand in place, I wonder if I should just run and force myself to move quicker.

The skies light up a few shades but the oppression of the clouds are still dominant throughout. I

haven't seen the sun in a day or so. I suppose it's up now, beyond the water filled masses in the sky. I don't think running is a good idea, just try your best to get there Cass. One foot in front of the other, you'll get there eventually. The environment is far more quiet now. The only sound that exists is my boots crunching the snow underneath. It must have only recently started to snow here, it's not piled very high up on the bridge. On the other hand, it doesn't look like it will be letting up any time soon. My feet still carry my body closer to this mysterious building until I finally reach it. I summon what strength I have left to knock on the door. It right in the middle of the path, so to continue down the path would need one to enter anyways.

I'm met with no response. Well, if nobody is here then nobody will mind my entering. I grab the knob and push the door open, finally able to give myself some well deserved rest. It's much larger on the outside than in but I'm extremely grateful to be in. There is a small fire going, a bed, a table and some sort of chest inside. I immediately make my way to the fire to warm my body up. If it wakes up the voice in my head so be it, I'm freezing. I take my off my coat, then boots and socks and let them dry by the fire. Goodness, I never thought it would be this relieving to get off of my feet. The crackle of the fire sounds more comforting than the crunch of the snow. Ah, now here I am. Alone, next to a fire. Well, looks like I now have at least one companion now. Perhaps that is why I'm not so afraid of this situation. Aion has given me enough trauma. I can overcome anything. I laugh a little under my breath, moving my hands and feet closer to the flame. I wonder, if I had died, would it be better than this? Am I living right now? I don't know.

If I Cry/5

I find myself waking up on the floor by the fire. A breeze must've snuck into the building from somewhere and brushed into my face. The fire's flames are just as strong as when I arrived. This thing is probably magic, like everything else so far. I look over at my boots and jacket, I hope they're dry now. Unless there's some sort of magic behind the rain too. I rub the surface of my coat, seems good, or good enough at least. I feel better. That rest is exactly what I needed. I fit my outfit back on and start to investigate the room. It looks like it is just a single room, definitely was larger on the outside. Two doors, one to enter and one to exit. Oh the chest and the bed. I was so tired I just fell asleep. I walk towards the the chest to check for anything that might be of use. Above the chest is a sign that reads "The correct choice deserves a reward."

I pull the chest over to the bed and plop my bottom down to search inside. It's a box, it's ten boxes and ten cups. My reward for making it here. Oh these are, what's the word, rations? These are for soldiers in the military or whatever. Well, I don't think these are for soldiers but that's all I know about them. I take one box out, one cup and bring them with me to the table in the room. I open it up and stare down at what's inside. I can't say it looks like a meal, about as colourful as monochrome TV. Some biscuits are on the side. There are utensils to eat the food with on the lid of the box. If I had to use my hands though I wouldn't mind too much. The taste is about what I expected too. The inside of the cup begins to sparkle. Magic cup. I lift it up and drink from it. It's water. It's extremely refreshing. I eat a little more and drink in between bites. It's not pretty but it'll do. The "food" is extremely bland though. I'll have to let the host know about it. In fact, the water has a better taste. As tasty as it is vibrant. The biscuits are good though. Now if I could find the rubbish bin...

I prepare to leave the safe room, not that I had a lot to take with me. Sorry feet, we're going the distance. I leave the box on the table, somebody will probably clean it right? Someone had to bring it here after all. Alright lets see, exit. The door is opposite to the entrance, undoubtedly leads to the rest of the bridge. Upon opening it up, a blast of frozen air barges into the shelter and onto me. The sky kept its sickly, gloomy look. I don't think I'll be guessing the correct time here but fortunately, I can make out another building in the distance. That should help me on my trip to the end. The snow is still falling but the bridge still only has a little snow cover on top. I step outside and shut the door, continuing my little adventure. This is a lot more manageable now, plus I'm still here and I'm still me.

That, Kassandra, no, Nyarlathotep? They didn't take control. It did seem like they knew what this area would be. I guess this is what they meant by beating the weather. I don’t think I beat the weather. Now I'm simply delivering them to the other side. But whoever is on the other side is linked to time. So, they should be an ally, right? Unless they were on Aion's side and maybe Aion still wants me to die. That guy did say she was looking for me. I need to find out who that guy is too. Well, all in due time.

Although my feet ache with every step, I feel like I can complete this journey without too much issue. Considering what I had done yesterday, I can take any distance now. I'm not soaked in water this time either. The snow is coating me but it's not a big deal. Plus that meal really revitalised me. The crunches of the snow return to accompany me as well. It is lonely. Not a living creature in sight. I might be the first thing to show up here in a long, long time. That thought does scare me, I don't really have a way back. I'm only hoping the end of this path has something beneficial to me. It's possible it doesn't. Maybe nothing is at the end of the road. Some sort of device that gives off a feeling similar to Aion, like my watch or a time crystal. Well, I reckon I'm nearly half way to the next shelter.

The silence that surrounds me is slowly consuming me. Pulling at me in its own way. But I'm plenty chatty in my head. So much going on yet what *they* said is floating around in my mind. Still following orders. Is it my idea to go here? Am I thinking of reasons that conveniently line up with Nyarlathotep's goal? They did say they wanted to come here to "kill a god." I don't think I've ever seen this much snow fall. The skies are still covered in the same shade of grey.

I was so close to Atlantis too. Why would there be a portal just to that location? Somebody I know would've had to make it right? It's no accident that it exists. I can't do anything about my situation right now and it's so frustrating. I'm just in my own head, hoping things work out. All the thinking in my head passes the time and before I know it, I'm standing in front of the next building. I press inside and take note of its layout. It's the same as the previous building. Nothing stands out or looked special. I brush all of the snow off of myself and try to warm up. This time I think I'll make use of the bed. I look at this room's chest and spot a similar sign above it.

"You've made it so far."

Is that praise or is it taunting? I think the environment is getting to me. Surely by this point in the journey I would run into someone, somebody. It's just me and the now extremely silent stranger in my head. What is the point of all this? I don't understand. It's ridiculous that I'm stuck out here in the middle of nowhere. What did I do to deserve this? I stopped Aion. I saved everything and everyone yet I'm as good as abandoned. I put my head into my lap and sink down onto the floor. If I cry would I feel better? Would it rinse these feelings away or would I further sink into despair? This is just like when I was in Aion's magic lobby. But she's not showing up for me this time. Should I turn back and speak to that guy? How much further do I have to go?

WhycantIcatchabreakallIdoisforothersIneveraskforarewardwhymeworldwhatdidIdowrong?

You've made it so far, Cass. Maybe it's encouragement. If the portal was to a location I'm familiar with and Aion is at least aware that I'm here, then maybe all of this is set up for me? It's like a test. A

test of my willpower or something like that. The path I've come on and the path I'm taking have changed. I'm alone. I always had someone before but here, save for the voice in my head, who has also just vanished, I'm all alone. The only thing I have going for me is that something familiar is up ahead. But, they didn't come for me. Surely they would've felt time freeze. Why haven't they come to investigate the source? The sinking feeling in my stomach leaves me feeling distraught and disappointed. Maybe I'm not worth investigating. Perhaps here, my abilities are nothing special. In a world where everything is special, nothing is.

Well, I've come this far right? I keep telling myself that. I just need to see it to the end. There's... something at the end, right? Ah, the chest. I might as well eat again before leaving. I pull on the chest as I did before but my attempt isn't very good. It's heavy, a good deal heavier than the previous one. It's larger too, I wonder why. Well, if I can't move it I'll open it here. Does that mean a lot of food is inside? That would be nice… I lift the top up and stare inside. It not food, this is...Wow this is Aion's sword! I'd recognise this thing anywhere. I've seen her use it so much. Plus I've been on the receiving end of it. I crouch down to lift it up.

Aion's sword, this has to be for me. Why else would it be on the path I'm on? What does any of this mean? Why am I here? Why is this here? Am I supposed to take this with me to the end of the path? And then what? What am I doing? Is it telling me to keep going? All of these thoughts, ideas, paths, possibilities. My own weight is heavier than the weight of the universe against Aion. I place the sword on my back and magic holds it in place, similar to a sheathe. Heh… at least I don't need to carry the weight of this too.

I push through the door to the other side and stare down the frozen bridge. The wind brushes into me with air much more bitter than before. The snowflakes are noticeably thicker. They are falling down from the sky much quicker while happily accompanying the winds in a combination attack against me. I feel like I'm beginning to hate the cold too. Unfortunately, I have no one to swap

minds with. Into the horizon I can see a light shine into the sky from far below. My heart flutters at the thought of finally reaching the end of this path. It’s enough to restart the flames of my spirit.

Maybe walking this path wasn't entirely for nothing. I crouch down and brush some snow out of the way to look at what’s below me. A massive snow covered forest, land. I crossed the sea. I could certainly feel it in my feet. That too, warm my heart. Nothing had happened to me, I was simply walking and yet, everything that has happened to me was within me. I've been my own conflict generator. I am, after all, human. I’m nothing particularly special surrounded by nothing but special things.

The light of the beacon keeps me going. It's proof of what I’ve done so far. With every pained step forward, the area becomes more and more visible. I can see a massive staircase above the clouds that travels down to the deep darkness on the ground. I was hoping I could see figures moving. Something, anything alive that could reassure me and put me on the right path. It also appears that I’m coming up on another rest shelter. Perhaps the final rectangle shaped box in the sky. I wonder what I'll find in that one. Each step forward is proof I'm capable of this. Hopefully its’ just one more rest stop. Then I’ll be done with this. Whatever this is…

The closer I get to the shelter the more the sky changes. The heavens now cast unhealthy shades of grey and violet. Bright, pale light seeps through gaps in the clouds coverage. I wonder why everything is changing here near the end. The snow is still healthily falling at it's own pace and the rest of the world is still silent. That's the part that bothers me the most. The silence. It's getting unbearable. The only sounds I could hear on this journey was the rain falling and the snow crunching beneath my feet. That's to be expected but everything else? The ocean waves made no noise. The winds don't blow into my ears. There is no wild life. There’s nothing real about this entire path. Even the food along the way was artificial. It's abnormal. An abnormal situation with an abnormal person within it. A single path to who knows where. Was the split in the path even real?

Why make two? Why go through all this? What is this illusion hiding?

As if on cue with my thoughts ending, I arrive at the rest stop. Standing before the door in front of me, I feel as if I had been pushed to the end of the road by yet another thing I didn't understand. Did I walk to the end? Or was I picked up and moved like a piece of plastic in a board game? At least that would save my feet from… now that I get to thinking about it, my feet are fine. My fatigue has vanished. I feel refreshed. Even better than when this all started. Let's not keep the person here at the end waiting, I'm going in. With my words backing me up, I open the final door on the frozen road. This room is noticeably different from the others. A guestbook is immediately to the left of me. I wonder what names could be inside but there's much more to investigate right now. There is an opening in the middle of the wall to the right but it’s for a door. It looks like it goes back outside. Some candles are aligned along all of the walls. This room felt something like a safe haven, a refuge after braving the storm. I wonder what it was, what storm did I weather?

I turn back towards the guest book and approach it. It’s a massive book. I flip it open and scroll through hundreds of pages full of names of people I had never heard of nor seen before.

How about reading from the start, that should at least key me in on the most important visitors. They wouldn't have shown up at the beginning for nothing. At the top of the list sits a name I’m relieved to see. Aion. Aion! Aion…

I move away from the book and look outside. I didn't notice this at first but there was a sign to the left of the exit. “Welcome to my Kingdom.” Interesting. I wonder who this Kingdom belongs to. I step out of the room into the world once again and feel like covers are being lifted off of my eyes and plugs are taken out of my ears. The roar of the wind this high furiously blows into me and around me. On them, the chirps of birds and cries of animals far below. The lights in the sky are impossibly vibrant. The once pale patterns are now like the multicoloured northern lights on Earth. It feels like I’m breathing fresh air. It is definitely a spirit raising situation. It's like I've finally

woken up.

“Speaking of woken up, hello.”

Under Moonlight/2*

“So you two had a fight and aren't on speaking terms?” Junko's voice grabs my wandering attention. I could've sworn I felt time stop in Ardor. What would Chrono need to stop time for though? Hmm unless… Oh well he'll manage, that's why he's there.

“Ah, yeah we had a spat and well, things are tricky now.”

“Tricky enough to get you two to stop talking. The way you talked about her I would've figured you two for lovers. Not time nor space could've hoped to separate you two. What exactly was it over?” Oh, if only you knew my new friend.

“I was the, sort of like the, head of this project. I was nearly complete with my work and she came by one day and said the… numbers were off and things weren’t as they seemed. We argued about it and after a lot of deliberating, she convinced me to pull the plug on the project. We've been on our separate ways ever since. But, you know, I think it's good, just taking some time to ourselves, taking a step back to look at what's important.”

“Time to ourselves. It seems there's never enough when you need it but when you don't it's plentiful.” She coyly smiles at me

“Time is ever fleeting as they say.”

“Right? Well speaking of time, Aion, it is getting late and I'd like to get back home before the sun starts showing. I'd rather not have people rightly think I'm a part of the water trade. I too, was looking to get some space.”

“There's a word for that right? Ukiyo. A fleeting world versus a sorrowful cycle. Like two sides of the same coin huh?”

“Ahaha. I guess I've been living from one moment to the next, not too concerned with how I may

end up. I worry not for sorrow nor staying in place.” She says.

“That's an interesting way to live.” I respond.

“Well, it brought me to an interesting person tonight. And that's really saying something, considering the clientèle I have.” She sighs before grabbing her things and standing up. I stay seated, curious to hear more.

“What about you Aion, what do you live for? The moment or something more?”

“Me? I suppose I live for everything, for every moment, so to speak.” I smile back at her and motion towards a hallway to the right of us. “I do have an extra room if you need more time.”

“Is there anybody else here? You have one of the most grand houses in the city but it's empty. No family? Anything?” Family?

“Oh well, it's like I said I use this place for vacations. It would be strange to keep it occupied otherwise. The rest is complicated.” She extends her hand out towards me. I get up and meet her half way.

“All this space and nobody to appreciate it, isn't that a little sad?”

“Maybe someday I'll have someone who can appreciate it.”

“Tonight was chance.” She walks into me, grabbing my hands with hers. “Just like the changing currents, you never know what time will bring.”

“Want me to call a taxi for you?”

“I don't often have one called for me this quickly… and even less so by another woman.”

“Well, chance right? Let's see where it takes us…”

Aion’s Twin/6

I stare in awe at a garden that sits deep down below, at the base of what appears to be a staircase linking the ground and the sky. It's not what I expected to see here but I’m glad to have made some tangible progress.

Climbing down the staircase sucks though. Regardless, I’m getting closer to the source of the time irregularity here. Whatever it is, I went through a lot of trouble to get here.

I didn't expect you to get to the end. Admittedly I was hoping you would've died along the way so I could retake control of the corpse.

That's horrible. What if I didn't come back from that death?

Oh well, I would've found some way to move on from that sad moment.

Noted. Now where do we go once we get to the bottom?

Fortunately, the previous time I was here, someone escorted me down to the garden. That someone isn't here for you, unfortunately. Maybe you're just not important enough to be formally received!

You could've done without that last bit… So what, does that mean nobody is here?

I do not pretend to know the inner machinations of Gods.

Don't think it don't think it don't think it don't think it...

Why are you imagining a carton of milk spilling over.

Ah, no reason. Hey, wow we're almost at the bottom let's take a look shall we?

Descending thousands of stairs is going to take an insane toll on my feet. Sorry body, just a bit more walking and then I won't walk for another thousand years. The snow down here isn't as thick as it is in the sky. It's pleasantly crashing down from the heaven that I had escaped from moments

ago. What do I do if nobody else is here?

There is certainly someone here, look at the garden. Someone has been tending it. It is neat and orderly, clean of waste and has clearly been cultivated. It's not natural. Aren't you a detective?

I'm a little tired you know. Doing this whole little journey on my own. Couldn't fly here because you apparently don't do well in the cold. Which might I add, it is cold at the moment.

There are different degrees to this. The winds over the ice create bone chilling, nail bitingly, bitter cold air, I detest it. It's like standing in front of an air conditioner. The breeze down here is much more mild.

What an absolutely ridiculous thing to dislike. You know what, we're here now, it's fine.

Let it go Cass, don't put too much of a damper on the mood. Now that I can see I'm only a handful of steps away from the ground, a temptation to lay down and hug it is starting to take over my mind. Deep down inside to counter that feeling is a murderous intent. I'm the only one here grateful to have completed the journey. My final steps press into the "Earth" below and it's admittedly gratifying. As much as I would like to take a moment to rest, this area is curious and my brain has an awful issue with curiosity. A garden, not east of heaven, but below it. Hah, well I suppose this isn't earth so, maybe that's how the directions match up out here.

Now that I'm finally here I take a good look around. It looks normal. Finally. Just a regular garden. Although I suppose gardens don't grow in the winter. Is it winter? It's snowing, it has to be winter. Does the moon experience seasons? Do these seasons affect this magical section? In fact, there are some animals in the area. None that look too friendly now that I get a good look at them. Wolves and Ravens. Beasts of Battle. This might be bad.

Stop thinking stupid things and get looking for the keeper of this sanctum. He's around here somewhere.

He? Who is he? You know who's here don't you?

Why would you kill someone you don't know? Of course I know him fool. I will ensure he suffers greatly as I peel back the fleshy innards of his mind for his transgressions.

Dude what the hell are you talking about? I need answers, now.

You are not worthy of answers, nor is he of giving them. Do as I say or I'll kill you.

Kill me? Please. You're a child. A child throwing a tantrum. And you know what?

What?!

I'm going to throw one back at you. Right here and now.

What do you mean. Elaborate human!

Lets see now, where would be a good spot?

Leisurely strutting around the garden's grounds, I look for a comfortable patch of grass to claim. I know any will do but I want to be extra petty. I walk around for a couple minutes before zoning into a spot. As if I was a cat, I claim the perfect place on a bed to take a nap. I crouch down and actually, I'm going to go even further. I'm gonna just lay down and stare at the sky.

You're joking right? The wolves and ravens will certainly try to kill you and if they fail I'll definitely kill you.

Shh, it's my turn for a nap. You can't do anything to me anyways, just a voice in my head. I already won our battle.

What? You think I'm making a joke here or something? Get up and search woman!

I look up at the world I had just left. Staring into a sky no different from the one on Earth. Even after everything I've done, I'm still me. I'm still healthy, or at least I think I am. I still have an entire life ahead of me. This is a part of my struggle. Whatever happens after this is fine with me. If I was going to be attacked or hurt for intruding it certainly would've happened by now. A God lives here after all. Maybe I've been deemed worthy for stopping Aion. Maybe it's time to rest a little.

A whiff of cool air rushes up my nose and wakes me up. I open my eyes back up, fortunately, as

the one still in control of my body. The dusting snow doesn't bother me too much. I kind of like the feeling of the flakes faintly pressing on me and melting into my skin. She didn't come after all. Maybe she would have if I paused several times but that would've just lengthened my stay. Maybe she isn't very popular here and that's why she doesn't want to come. The colour of the sky begins to lighten up. The clouds are being pushed away by the winds so far above and within them I stare at something incredible. The castle in the sky, with the bridge jetting out of it and into the horizon. What an amazing place. All that time spent, for something right below my nose. I can hear some sort of blabbering in the back of my head but I'm not interested in entertaining any ideas they have. Further beyond though, I can hear another voice. It's slightly familiar but, I can't recall who it belongs to. It's coming from behind me, in the direction of the staircase.

I tilt my head as far back as it will go, trying to get a peek at whoever is approaching. There are four people, one man and three women. They slowly get closer and I roll over on my stomach, keeping my eyes primed on the them. Within only a hand full of steps away from me, I recognise the one on the left. It's that stupid, pretty boy from before. He could be Aion's twin they look so similar. He was back in that lab when we left, how'd he get here before me?

I dart my stare to the others, all of them women I'm not familiar with. The first is walking a bit ahead of the other. She has soft, beautiful looking red hair which feels like it clashes with her sharp green eyes. Now that I can take a good look, they all looked fairly similar. Fair skin, strong jaws, light freckles across all of them. All of them are wearing similar types of purples coloured robes. They look like they were transported out of the 15th century…

I stand up and shake the dust and dirt off of myself, watching the group approach me. I hope I'll be getting some of my questions answered now.

"You look like a cat down there." The man says while extending his hand to me. I reach out and shake it with my right hand.

“I'm impressed. You made it out of the lab on your own.” The unknown man says. *Not on your own.*

“Ah well, not entirely on my own but, I did somehow make it here.” I respond.

“I will answer your questions as best I can but in exchange, I have some work for you I'd like completed.”

“Work? What kind of work?”

“Nothing you haven't already done. Just some errands really. The same as Aion used to give you.” Aion… They are related. I escape one master and run right into another. This is the price for information. Well, how bad could it be?

“Will any of the work kill me?” I ask. The women next to the man start laughing.

“That's a question. You have to agree for me to answer!” I remain silent.

“It'll be fine, a piece of cake for someone with your talents. Trust me.” Oh this manner of speech, I don't know how but you have to be related to her.

“Ok fine but, I want everything answered. Everything.” I demand.

“Everything it is. What's first?” He responds with a smile.

“Who are you? Are you related to the person in the lab? Are you related to Aion and if so, what is your relationship to her?”

“Bit of a loaded question but sure, I'll answer.” He runs his right hand into his hair and laughs for a moment. What is this guy's deal?

“I am Chrono, the God of Time. I am and am not the person in the lab. The person in the lab is an automated, electronic and autonomous version of me, made out of metal, some muscle, some love I suppose.”

“That's a lot of words to say it's basically a robot version of you?”

“Not a robot, an android. I don't believe you're from an era where technology has progressed far

enough to use this sort of thing. It's not your fault. Anyways, some of us use these cyber-bodies to complete more work or manage things that we can't."

"You use a robot version of you to do lots of work you can't do?"

"Ahaha. Ok think of it like this. You need clean clothes. You could spend time washing them by hand or you can put it in a machine that will wash it for you. This frees you up to focus on doing something else."

"Oh… but I don't have a washing machine" Heh heh heh…

"Right, ahem, well, as for Aion, she is the perpetual, cyclical nature of time. The future is a return of the past for the present. I am the empirical, progressive nature of time. There is a clear past, present and future. And here you are, somehow capable of possessing a method of controlling the present. I find that fascinating. I find it even more fascinating that you shattered Aion's cycle. Neither of us foresaw that."

"You knew about Aion? And what she was doing? Why didn't you stop her?"

"Why would I stop her? If it was to be then it is to be. It simply wasn't however. The universe has a way of working these things out. Ah, but we've gone on quite a bit and our other guests are waiting, please allow me to introduce..."

The woman with red hair turns her head towards Chrono and lifts her hand, he pauses his conversing after that. She seems familiar but I can't recall if I've met her before or not.

"Cassandra Watson, your reputation precedes you. The girl who stopped the Goddess of Time. Incredible. I'm glad to finally have met you." She rests her hand on her chest and smiles. "I am Morrigan." She lifts her hand from her chest and weaves it over to the two women by her side.

"These are my sisters, Badb and Macha. Ladies if you will." The two bow their heads to me and smile.

"Hello." I shyly reply. Being so close to these pretty ladies is making me feel hot…

“A pleasure Miss. Watson.” They speak together. Oh right. Siblings. That explains why they all look so similar. Although, I feel like I'm receiving royalty right now...

“We oversee this land, taking care of it for Chrono and Aion. Despite neither of them truly appreciating it.” Morrigan speaks, almost like she was reading my mind and filling me in on the situation. Chrono laughs just loud enough for all of us to hear it.

“You're all goddesses?” I ask.

“Yes, at one point. But as so many others before us, the further human society progresses, the less we need to play the role of their guardians.”

“Oh! I think I know a bit about you three! The Morrigan, you're a trio.” I say.

“Sometimes.” She replies with a smirk.

“Why live here? What's your connection to Aion and Chrono. Must be close despite the lack of appreciation I presume.”

“Aion and I have some… past together. Chrono gave us land to work with. It was beneficial to come here.”

“Beneficial? Why?”

“To go off what I said a moment ago, humans have progressed far enough to no longer need us. War is now truly in their own hands thanks to technological advances.”

“What does war have to do with watching over them?”

“War is the great binder. It builds a people up and makes them protect what's theirs which means they decide on what is worth defending and protecting. This naturally means they nurture the land they live on for the welfare of their people. Although, I admit I do sometimes act as a goddess of sovereignty when things get tricky.”

“Wow, I had no idea. Honestly, I figured you would've prefer something more sea-like.”

“The Sea? Ahahah oh no. I am of Greatness and Terror, not the water. I am no faerie. Perhaps you

should invest in schooling beyond the clock tower little English woman.” I didn't actually know that. My face is burning hot...

“Ahem, right, sorry. If I could ask a few more questions, Chrono.” I say to him.

“Of course, any and all you desire.” He responds. Morrigan moves next to her sisters and they begin chatting among themselves.

“What is this place? That castle in the sky? The bridge that runs out of the castle, what is going on?”

“This is Ardor. We're at the end of time. Above us in the sky is The Castle of Reverse Destiny. Within the castle are several sections, the biggest one being The Witches House. The bridge out of it is a test of mettle, mental fortitude and all that. You have escaped it and ended up here.”

“This is a lot to take in.” I say.

“You asked a lot of questions.” He replies.

“Right, so this is the End of Time. Like where Aion and I fought? In her cosmic egg thing?”

“Cosmic egg? Oh, is that what she calls it? And yes, this is the End of Time.”

“What do you call it then Chrono?”

“A Phantasm Projection. Although, I can see why she calls hers that. Her imagination might one day be able to project into reality for everyone else. I think you are one of the few privileged to see it.”

“What's the significance of hers being at the End of Time?”

“It's just out in the middle of nowhere I suppose. Away from Earth, other planets, even others here at the End of Time. Oh that reminds me, she showed up shortly after her fight with you. I do say, I never saw her lose a fight but you, you punched a bloody hole through her! She's fortunate that it wasn't her proper body.”

“A robot! Like yours up in the castle!” I tease him.

“Now you're just doing this on purpose you brat!” He throws his hands down in a fit. That was so worth it ahaha.

“Ok, sorry. I had my fun. Was Aion using one for the same reason you were? Where's the real Aion then?” I ask.

“Aion and I use them for different reasons. She uses the body as a safety precaution. She has been in several life and death situations over the years so the body functions as a double for her. It is both her and not her. The body is metal but the brain is real.”

“The brain is real?” I ask.

“It is. Aion is in control of the machine unlike mine where an AI runs the show as best it can.”

“An AI?” I ask again.

“Let's save that for later, I'm sure there are more important things at hand right now.”

“The real Aion then, where is she?” I ask another question.

“Hmm, I suppose the real one is still in her study. When she appeared for repairs, she had left almost instantly. At least that's what the log shows.”

“She left instantly? Was it to look for me?” I ask with a little hope lingering on the ends of my words.

“I can't say for sure, there's nothing in the log besides her leaving. No mention of anything else.” I must admit, it is very disappointing hearing that she might've just left without looking for me.

“Hey, don't get yourself down about it. Aion has almost always been like that. Never one to wait.” I must've looked like a sad puppy for him to try encouraging me. It’s a gut punch really. She just left without a word.

“How about this, let's go to our archive. It's sort of like our base. I'll show you around and you can get washed up and have something to eat. Something good!” He exclaims.

“So you *do* know the food on the path sucks!” I shout at him. He shrugs his shoulders and

smirks.

“Alright whatever, I'll join. I have more questions though.” I say.

“We can walk and talk. I'll answer until you're satisfied.” He turns to face Morrigan and her sisters, motioning at them to come along.

“Alright ladies let's go back and help our little Time Detective out. What do you say.”

In unison they said , “Aye,” and we all begin the trek to this archive of theirs. I feel overwhelmed with everything I've been told so far. I wonder if I come off as annoying. But it's not really my fault. Aion hadn't told me much. I was working under her on behalf of The Ministry. I haven't seen any of those people in some time now either. Morrigan is different from what I remember. What I remember… What do I remember…

Why do you care so much about what they think?

I'm just wondering. I stopped something horrible from happening and yet I feel like I'm still being treated like a rookie. And what about you, you were curiously quiet while that all went down. What happened to killing the God here?

I didn't imagine there would be so many here… If it was just Morrigan I would've taken her into the darkest stretches of darkness in the cosmos.

What do you have against Morrigan?

She is our competition, Watson.

How so? I've never meet her before and she seems to be a deity that has little to do with time.

Morrigan is Aion's...

“Hey, Watson?” My thoughts are interrupted by a voice calling for me.

“Oh, what is it Chrono?” I respond.

“So, there's a secret way to get to the archive. You can just follow us but keep the route in mind if you're ever back here on your own ok?”

“Yeah sure. What's the secret?” I ask curiously.

“There's a path of candles that lead to the destination. You need a good eye to spot them but they'll take you all the way.”

“Why candles? That seems sort of silly.”

“They light up in the darkness, that's about it.” He replies. That’s kinda lame.

“Is that like, magical or something?”

“Yeah something like that. Anyways there's a massive frozen lake down at the bottom of the hill. We cross it and make our way into the archive.”

“This is so convoluted, who designed this?” At the end of my word Morrigan turns her neck, not her head, her neck turns 180 degrees and she stares at me. I smile and wave at her, hoping to be sparred for my curt words.

The walk down the hill slowly brings the lake into view. The area is gorgeous. A sheet of snow blankets the trees in it's grasp. I find it quite tranquil. I feel so calm, despite being a stranger in this unknown world. This part feels more natural than the garden. The pine trees almost shivered in place with the breeze from the lake. Foxes and hares scurry about in the snow, the beasts from earlier have vanished from sight. There are paw prints aplenty in the snow, as well as the shoe shaped prints that had travelled here not too long ago. As we approach the lake, the temperature of the air drops. Chrono steps on it first. Then he jumps on it, assuring me that it’s fine to walk on. I didn't need convincing, they had already travelled across. We all share a laugh at him for behaving like an idiot. A mist settles over the ice, it’s strange. You couldn't see it from above but when you get level with it, it blinds and disorients you. I scoot next to Chrono, hoping that he won't lose me. Although if he got lost...

We cross while listening to Chrono tell stories of his past. Encounters with the strange and arguments with Aion. About his old partner who apparently looked eerily similar to me and to top it

off, every so often he would break out into song. He’s not a very good singer but I can't hate on someone who tries so earnestly. When he decided we should talk about me I made mention of some cases I had done with Aion as well as time I had spent in Atlantis with friends, whom I dearly miss. Every so often I hear the sounds of sparkles. I'm not sure how else to put it. It's sort of like a cartoony idea where the gold glistens and it has a sound effect. Every so often I look in the direction of the noise and can see these sparkles fly out into the open, as if there were people out there throwing magical spells at each other. Just how big is this lake?

All my thinking takes me away from the present. We finally cross the lake into a frozen forest and Chrono lets me know we are close. I’ve been auto piloting my actions for however long it’s been. The air is rich with the aroma of spruce, a small change from the pine on the opposite side. It feels magical to be in. Around the corners in the darkness, candles crackle with light, illuminating the path for us. Not that my guide needs it. I look above the trees and can see the stone pillars of a massive structure beyond them. Even though this was the same sort of hill shaped land, the land here rises much higher. The stone looks like the top of a castle now that I think about it.

We go up a small climb and Morrigan begins to check on me, making sure I’m able to get up fine. She’s not much taller than I am but she definitely looks more fit. I wonder why she keeps looking back at me. Her sisters are further ahead chatting with Chrono. Morrigan and I are playing catch up as we continue to make our way forward. Although the snow is no longer falling directly on us, every so often the weight of frozen water becomes too much for the branches of the trees and snow comes crashing down. It slowly gets darker under the trees and the mood of the forest begins to shift.

Shadows creep out from behind the trees. Sounds of shifting from behind bushes far out of sight start to pick up. I hope this is normal. I lose sight of Chrono and the others. I even lose Morrigan, I need to catch up.

The winds grow more fierce, the smell of smoke penetrates the area. It feels like something wrapped it's essence around me, marking me like a dog that peed on something to mark it's property.

“I thought I would try my luck, it's not often someone new comes through here. Are you with those stiffs up ahead?” A voice? From where? Nobody is around, I can't tell who or what it’s coming from.

Oh please, just respond to it.

“Uhm yes, I'm with the stiffs ahead. Where are you? Show yourself!” I shout.

“Where am I? Are you blind or something? We just met.” A girls voice responds.

“Human's don't see very well in the dark you know, is this a joke?” I ask.

“Human? Your kind is rare here.” She responds.

“Well, you’re rare to me.” As I finish speaking, an apparition forms out of the smoke into the shape of a person. Is that what she meant by we just met? Then it wrapped itself around me? Gross…

“I like your look. More than the other monsters here. Mind if I borrow it?”

“Borrow? What do you mean borrow?” The human shaped figure returns to the smoke and begins to morph into something weird looking. After a moment, I’m staring back at myself.

Oh well isn't that fascinating? A creature of darkness that can copy the looks of others. I feel a certain, kinship with it.

Don't bond with this darkness wearing smoke monster! That's weird! I need to catch up to the others or I'm going to become this thing’s food. And by extension, so will you.

Fine.

“Hey, you're in my way. Would you move so I can catch up to the others?” I ask.

“Move? What if I don't?” She asks.

“I'll beat you up.” I threaten her.

“Scary...” She replies.

“So? What's it going to be smoky, ghost monster thing?” I ask.

“My name is Enna.”

“Ok, Enna. Will you please let me catch up to my friends?”

“Will you let me become one of your friends?” The form of me vanishes and in its place is a girl. She couldn't be very old, not more than a 10 year old kid. What is going on here? Whatever, she wants a friend. I’ll be her friend. No problem. Sure, I can do that.

“Ok, Enna, I'll be your friend.” I assure her.

“Will you come back to play with me?” She asks.

“I'll come back.” I respond.

“Promise?”

“I promise. I can't say when I'll be back but I will try my best to return someday.” She timidly nods her head in agreement and fades into the air around her. The light slowly returns, it’s no longer as dark as it was before she showed up. I stand in place, wondering if what I saw was even real. I rub my hands on my arms, I’m chilled by the idea of having my entire being copied like a file on a computer.

You’re quiet. You don't have a smart comment for what just happened?

No. Unless you'd like to hear me insult her for having such a stupid identity and reason for letting you pass.

“Would you like my brat?” Morrigan says to me, simultaneously surprising me and breaking the “silence” I had been standing in.

“Your brat? What?” I reply confused. I don't know what she means. Her brat? The kid? She lifts up the cloak on her back, wiggling it for a moment before setting it back down.

“Oh, your cloak? Is that the word for cloak in Gaelic?”

“Correct, well done. I’ll make a better Englishwoman of you yet Cassandra!” The sarcasm was practically oozing out of her mouth and onto the ground. I guess it was too obvious.

“You however, are Aion's brat. How did you manage that, really?” She asks.

“Aion's? I don't really know what to say.” She stops in front of me and runs her right index finger around in a circle. I comply and turn around. She covers me with her cloak and starts walking away. I can tell because I can hear the snow crunching under her feet. What was that about? I face forward again, watching her.

Further ahead, I can see Chrono waving. There is pitch black darkness behind him. He begins to speak with Morrigan while I try catching up. I'm not going to be able to keep up at this point, my feet are hurting again. I hope there are beds. God I could use a bed. As I get closer to them I’m able to make out a cave behind Chrono. A surplus of light is spilling in from the other end. Oh it's not a cave, it's a tunnel. The base of a massive structure is grounded beyond the light. The further in I look, the more magical it appears. I feel like this is the final part of an enchanting spell placed on me by the whimsical world I had found myself in.

“Hey, holding up ok, Watson?” Chrono is the first to call out as I arrive at the steps of the tunnel.

“No, not really but it looks like we don't have much left. Is that the archive on the other side?” I ask him. He nods at me and turns towards it.

“It's just a bit more, then you can rest to your hearts content.” He says.

“Please, give me a bed to sleep in. I need a bed, tell me you have a bed Chrono.” I reply.

“Hah, we have many beds, worry not. You can pick any room you want, there are plenty. Well, except the Master's room. But they're not really around often enough to use it so maybe it would be ok...”

“Or perhaps if you can warm up with me.” Morrigan says while winking at me. Oh my, how bold of her. I return a smile instead of words to her.

“Let's go inside, shall we?” Chrono walks into the tunnel and we all follow. Our steps echo across the cavernous walls.

Hey, we need to kill that guy.

We? Who is we? When did this become we?

He's dangerous, he was behind combining us you know.

Well there's some information I could just ask him about, no need to antagonise him. Besides I don't think I'm walking away from four vs one.

You wouldn't but I will. Do not forget who I am.

Yeah big evil deep space squid god. Didn't you chicken out of it earlier? I just want to sleep man. In a bed. Maybe I'll even have some company in that bed.

So stupid. He's the enemy. The reason I'm stuck with you and you with I. We don't need sleep we need answers and if you don't do this I am going to...

Please be quiet. I’m the one who got us here. I want to learn more from him. I can't call him an enemy right now. Suspicious sure, but he's a God. I've sort of learned they do whatever they want.

Why don't you just listen? What must I do to have your cooperation?

You have this relationship backwards. You listen to me, I won the battle. I'm in charge here.

My internal argument fazes into silence as a response never reaches me. I’ve fallen far behind the others again. Chrono is already out of the tunnel and waving his hand. He seems to really like doing that. Oh I know, it's like a dog that runs ahead and “scouts” out the area while keeping its master in sight. He’s standing next to someone. A new person. They look pretty tall but it also looks like they have their head sort of, drooping down. As if they were midway to falling asleep… Ahahaha. I wait pause for a moment, simply staring at everyone near the exit of the tunnel. Morrigan turns around and shoots me a peace sign with her hand and then spins back around. Her sisters whispering something into each others ears before following Morrigan's lead, vanishing into the light.

Stray Child/7

I haven't been around this many people since I was in Atlantis and that was a thousand years ago. I need to ask Chrono about that portal or whatever it is. I'd like to see my friends again. Even if Althea chastises me for going to the end of time. Man, a thousand years… Now that I think about it, how did I do that? I can't go forward but something happened. I made it to The End of Time. Was it because of my situation? Do I get stronger when put in a corner or something?

Whatever, I just want to see them all again. Althea, Daphne, and Cassie. They haven't had any contact that whole time. Did they try to look for me? There's the portal so someone here was in contact with them. Right? I want to see her again… What happened that day Nyarlathotep had abducted me? Why didn't Aion ever come for me? Questions on top of questions, that's all I have.

"Certainly took your time walking over Watson, something on your mind?" Chrono asks me as I finally catch up to everybody. I guess something on my mind is the easiest way of putting it.

"Yeah, I've got a lot on my mind. I still have lots of questions and have been thinking of new ones." He nods at me and holds is arms out, to the person next to him. The building we stand before goes over my head by a thousand kilometres. This thing is so big it's blocking out the majority of the view of the sky. Arcs and towers cast massive shadows down upon the land below. I can only stare in awe at the sight of everything. That's what this place is, it's a castle! We are standing right outside of the gatehouse.

"Ahem. Hey! You're up!" Chrono punches the woman next to him and she slowly raises her head, opening her eyes. She lets out a less than worried yawn and lazily waves her hand.

"Watson, this is Iwako. Toro Iwako. She's our gate guard. She's supposed to be awake, guarding the gate. Iwako, this is Cassandra Watson, she's an… associate of Aion and I. She's allowed in and

out at her leisure, got it?"

"Got it. Welcome to Tintagel, Ms. Cassandra Watson! Would you like me to do anything else Master Chrono!"

"No, that's all thank you. Supper in a couple of hours. Don't work too hard." He replies. She salutes him like a soldier and waves at the rest of us. I step forward to access the innards of the stone fortress. In the middle of the regular sound of the crunching snow underneath my boots echo in a significantly louder click. I look down to try and catch what it was but at the same time, the doors to the castle automatically opened themselves. I peer into the opening grand hall, my eyes quickly accompanied by a rush of warm air from the inside. Tintagel huh.

"C'mon, let's get you inside and something to eat." Morrigan brushes into my shoulder and grabs my hand. She walks me inside, guiding me to a room off on our right hand side. The floor glistens with sparkles, flickering back at the candles scattered over the ceiling in chandeliers. I'm sure they have some sort of magical enchant on them. They are all bright, flashing as all sorts of colours yet appear natural. It's soft on the visual palette. There is a good chunk of the floor covered by a massive red carpet. It looks extremely luxurious. I feel bad simply for stepping on top of it. Far beyond in the back of the hall are a couple of staircases and the red carpet leads up to a super sized fireplace. The hall's acoustics allow the sounds of the crackling flame reach all the here at the front. Additionally, the flame is definitely the source of the warm air that fills the atmosphere of these halls. It's as if I'm right up next to it's heat. Everything here is incredible.

"Cassandra please, stop the day dreaming and come with me." I realise I'm standing dumbfounded, taking in what I could. Morrigan opens the door to a side room here and pulls me inside with her. It is impossible to have ever imagined this was all in a single room off to the side but somehow it is here. I'm having trouble grasping it. Like everything else here though, so I'm just gonna roll with it. As far as I can see, bookshelves are stacked one after another, full of books. The

room is lights up similarly to the grand hall before it.

“Cassandra here, I've got a table set up. Let's have some tea and chat.” She waves her hand in the air. A round table and all its parts, including a tea set begin floating into position before Morrigan. That's actually pretty cool. A couple of chairs made their way to her, settling at the table for the two of us. A large piece of cloth fits itself over the table and the tray with the teapot, teacups and tea saucers on top float onto the table. I guess this is service fit for Gods. I take my seat next to Morrigan and the teapot beings pouring tea into both of our cups. Shortly after, another tray floats over to us. Full of pastries, sweets and fruit. I feel oddly reminiscent.

I reach for something that appears to be honey toast and another plate slides below my arms, presumably to place the food on. I take a bite and let it settle in my mouth.

“So, how's it taste Cass?” I stare at her after swallowing it, I'm sure saliva is flooding out of my mouth.

“It is great, it's fantastic, it's amazing. Absolutely the best thing I've had in at least a thousand years. No joke!” I take another bite and Morrigan let's out some hearty laughter. She grabs a piece for herself, placing her hand on her cheek and revelling along in the taste with me.

“This is amazing. How does it all work? I wish I could stay here forever!” I exclaim.

“Ahaha, glad you are enjoying. You'll be able to stay for as long as you want.” She replies.

“Isn't it kinda hard to see though, maybe brighten the lighting a bit.” I suggest.

“Well none of the other residents are blind but I'll forward the suggestion to Chrono.”

“I'm not blind man. It's just a little dark!” I'm taken back by her forward speaking.

“Mhm sure.” She replies.

“This room is bigger than the entrance to the castle. How does it work?”

“Magic.” She answers briefly.

“The lights?” I ask another question.

“Magic?”She answers succinctly.

“The tea and sweets?”

“Believe it or not, magic.” She answers annoyed. We laugh together while conversing more about my old day to day life. We weren't behaving as if we were in a library but it didn't hurt anybody since we were the only people inside. Multiple trays come and good with more food, taking away all the pots of tea we consume. I feel like I’m speaking to an older sister more than anything. Then it crossed my mind where her sisters had disappeared off to. I'd like to chat with them too, build some sort of rapport with them.

“So, is there a maid with a pocket watch somewhere in here too?” I ask.

“How silly. No, there isn't. Well actually, there used to be. But she lost her pocket watch and stopped cleaning and coming here at all. Kinda sad actually. Anyways, don't worry. We're pretty much everyone you'll see here. At times, Chrono may host someone but that’s it. Why do you ask? Want to become the new head maid?” She stopped coming here… and had a pocket watch. I have an feeling I know the previous maid.

A knock on the door to the hall echoes throughout the library and interrupts our talk. Chrono walks in and waves at us.

“Hey Watson, if you're ready I've had a room set up for you. You can leave your clothes in a basket by the door and they'll be washed for you. I'm sure there are some garments we can find around here that'll fit you.” I look at Morrigan and she nods at me. I take my final sip of tea and get up, meeting Chrono at the door.

“Don't forget my offer Cass!” Morrigan shouts from behind, tiding up the table for the both of us. I smile at her again and walk out with Chrono.

“What did she offer you, Cass?”

“Oh nothing, just a silly idea she had.”

“Right, well, we have to take the stairs up but I find it quicker to speed time up to get there instantly. So we'll be doing that.” Chrono snapped his fingers and like he said, we were there really quick. It was a grandiose looking door that when he opened the door, opened into an even more grandiose room.

“I'll leave the basket by your door, take all the time you need. There's no rush here.” I could've sworn we just rushed up here but oh well. I will take him up on his offer of cleaning my clothes. I've been in these for who knows how long. This is exciting, I have no doubt the bathroom will be of masterful style and craftsmanship. I remove my boots and set them off to the side, taking my socks off and dropping them into the basket. Following that is Morrigan's cloak, which I had completely forgot I was wearing. I mean, I guess she wouldn't mind if I had it washed on her behalf. I move on to my jacket and then my top. I toss them into the basket and shimmy out of my pants, getting another two points and finally my underwear frees my body.

There's another door in the room which I can’t imagine being anything other than the bathroom. I enter through the door and stare at the beautiful, clean room. The walls must be marble and the octagon shaped walk-in shower has ample room. The shower is encased by glass, including the door to enter. A massive bathtub sat across from it with a view of the outside with a window. It didn't look like there was any sort of obfuscation on them so anybody would be able to see inside and outside of it. I move towards the tub to start the water up letting it get hot. I don't know if it needs to do that but I do it anyway. Pulling back for a moment I get a look at myself in the mirror. Somehow, despite it all, I see my face looking back at me, albeit thinner than what I remember. The rest of my body however, looked rough. I certainly appear emaciated. I haven't eaten in some time. In fact, my clothes all flew off so quickly and I didn't think anything of it. It was because they were barely hanging on. No wonder she offered me the cloak, I must've looked like a little dying gremlin.

I just shed the less useful features of your flesh off, it was doing you no favours. Carrying around

that adipose tissue provided no benefit. Not to mention those disgustingly sized blobs hanging from your chest.

Man, what the fuck. You starved me?

Your body still received nutrition. Chrono agreed to it..

What? How? Why?

It was some sort of drip feed of liquid from a bag into your body. Apparently it contained nutrients without the need of eating. I chose not to eat while awake because this body was soft and weak.

God damn and I was starting to have a decent time too. You just had to open your mouth.

Mouth?

Whatever the hell it is that you use to speak to me. Fuck. Can you just stay quiet again while I shower?

Fine.

Damn, what's all that sugar going to do to my body? Am I going to crash? How did I accomplish anything like I am now? How did I make it this far?

I lent you energy for the journey. I did not want you dying in the cold and therefore abandoning me in the cold.

How fucking thoughtful, thank you space demon. Now shut up. I stop the running water in the tub and turn towards the shower. I'll hop in here real quick, wash up, then relax in the bath. I turn the shower on and reach for the shampoo, rubbing my noggin with whatever this stuff is. I mean, it has to be good, Chrono has a great head of hair. I rinse it out and stare at the wall for a few moments, wonder where she is at. Why isn't she coming? Did I do something wrong? If I knew what I did I'd apologise but it's pure silence. I don't know what's going on. I grab the body wash and begin washing myself. How long has it been since I've cleaned myself? Not since Atlantis?

I'm a train wreck of a human being right now. Maybe that's why Aion doesn't want to see me. She doesn't need a mess like me around. I exit the shower and reach for a towel on the rack before remembering I was going to take a bath too. God damn what is going on with me? I walk over to the bath, touching the inside of it. The water is still radiating with heat.

It's fine Cass, you're fine. You're safe. Just step into the water, let it cover you in its ebb and flow. The water is hot, it's burning my skin and with every move I make it gets even hotter. I'm admittedly kind of hesitant letting my butt touch the bottom of the porcelain container. It's just so damn hot. I eventually let myself sink inside to the bottom of the ceramic coffin. My heart is pounding like crazy in my chest, is it because of the sugar? The sugar and the heat? Or just the heat? I have no idea. It's an intimate encounter with one's self. My legs float freely when I allow them to and it feels good. Pushing them back down against the water feels good too.

I can see my body rise and fall with every breath. When I lower my chest inside, I can feel something almost euphoric. Admittedly, I am a little curious. I'm the only one in here and I told the other one to shut up so... I grab my chest. A vulgar action but I want to know how it would feel. I squish the last remaining bastion of fat on my body and moan. I let go and grab my nipples, pinching them and letting the pleasure take control. I put a hand down below on my private parts, the sensations get stronger and the air feels even hotter. Is this the passion of my own body? I continue touching, my arousal is burning hot. In other words, I'm horny.

My heart pounds. My body moves with the water. This is a dangerous feeling. I push myself even further down, the hot air is almost suffocating me but I feel so good. If I keep rubbing like this I'm really going to cum. The sound of the water constantly splashing might give away what I'm doing here. I don't know why I keep thinking about being caught but I don't care either. I can feel the build up inside me. My whole body is participating in this. The electric tingling travels past my knees, it runs into my toes. It's a delightful experience but in the back of my head, I wish it could be shared

with the one I miss. The one I want to be with. My head is starting to get light. I've done what I need to in here. I should stop before the waters claim me. On the other hand, maybe being controlled isn't so bad after all...

I flip the switch in the tub and the water starts to drain. I don't know how much time passed while I was in there but it was great. I pick the towel from earlier back up and begin patting my body dry. I set it on the hook on the door and grab another towel to wrap my body in, then another to wrap my hair in. I can't see myself in the mirror this time, the humidity has claimed it. I head back into "my" room and on the bed are my clothes, save for my jacket. It's on a coat rack by the door. Was that thing here when I first entered? I don't even remember. While seating myself on the bed, I stare around the room again. I look out of the windows. It's a beautiful view of the frozen lake. I can't believe how familiar this environment feels while being unfamiliar at the same time. The feeling is a little similar to that of travelling. I suppose I am travelling at the moment. I'm certainly a far ways away from home.

After hopping back into my clothes I exit the room. I feel time shift just a tiny bit and there's Chrono, ready to receive me. He smiles and waves at me.

"Cass, would you be interested in having a photo taken with us? Wow! Heat is positively radiating off of you. I hope you enjoyed the bath!" He says.

"A photo? Why do you need a photo? And yes, I did enjoy it. It helped calm me down."

"I'm glad to hear that. The photo is for the memories of course. I've already asked Morrigan, Badb, Macha, and Iwako, we just need you!" They need me? Someone needs me for once? Well that's a nice feeling, even if it's something small like a picture.

"Ok sure, where are we going?"

"The main hall, by the fireplace. I'd like a nice, hearty sort of environment. And since you're the first guest we've hosted in a long, long time, well it's perfect."

“Take me there, Chrono.” He nods and snaps his fingers. Just like before, we move instantly down to everyone else. Chrono goes to set up the camera, it’s surprisingly the least futuristic, least magical thing here. It’s just a regular looking camera on a tripod.

“Cass hey, glad you agreed to the photo.” Morrigan calls out to me first, smiling as she spoke.

“Afterwards lets have dinner set up and we can all chat and end the day on a good note.” Badb says. Morrigan and I whole heatedly agreed with her words, nodding in sync with one another.

Chrono nods in agreement too while Iwako is dozing off. I wonder if I could learn to sleep while standing up. That seems like a fairly useful trait.

“Alright, it'll have a ten second countdown. Act like you know what you're doing in ten seconds.” Chrono gives us our instructions and I can say for at least myself, I'll put on my best smile.

Ten,

nine,

eight,

seven,

six,

five,

four,

three,

two,

one!

The camera makes a snapping noise and I could only feel dread as Chrono walked over to pick the thing up. The weight of two arms sit around my neck.

“Oh this looks great, we actually got everybody for once, isn't that something. Thank you Cass!” I could hear Chrono speaking but in my head I felt submerged underwater. I could only hear the

sound of water pushing and pulling away at me. I was caught so off guard because I never even felt it happen. It was during the countdown, in an instant before the final second.

Chrono walked over to us and showed the photo on the cameras screen. There it is. Everybody, like he said. Iwako, Chrono, Morrigan, Me, Badb, Macha, and Aion. All together.

Part Three-Autonomous Oblivion

“I will tell you the final tale I have left to tell. To bring a thousand year long plan to fruition, I had to test this body. I had to be sure I could fool her friends. The final people who stood in my way. How sour my luck was however! The first face to see me return was Althea. Of course she was the first! She immediately put me to work, set a case right up for me. The situation was a fake, it only existed to trap me. She knew the moment I showed up. I never had a chance. Nobody does. You can't beat Truth.”

White Noise/1

“Well I'll be, you returned. And not a moment too soon.” That voice, I recognize it. Althea. It appears I'm already in the claws of the enemy. I had hoped to arrive unnoticed but this is fine.

“Oh my goodness! Althea! Is it you?!” I run over to her, happy as I can be. Which isn't much but I need to stretch this face's smile out anyways.

“Cassandra Watson, you've returned. And you look none worse wear. Very good! Please tell me all about what happened!” She says. Her smile is positively beaming. I didn't know this monster was possible of making a face like that but well here I am, pot calling the kettle black.

“Althea, you wouldn't believe it. Aion and I fought. It was so crazy! There was all sorts of time stopping and sword swinging and fist throwing but I eventually came out on top! I stopped her Althea! I did it! I saved everyone!” I open my arms and move in to hug her. She reciprocates and we share a brief moment together. Two cosmic horrors hugging like we're best friends, it sickens me to my core. I will give you an especially painful death Althea, it's a promise.

“That's wonderful news Cass and your timing is impeccable as always.” One of her familiars

appears, what were they called? The Cat Sith. Why does she have them in her employ?

“My timing? What's up? Is something going on?”

“I'm not exactly sure but not even five minutes ago, the phone in your office was ringing.” My phone? What is she being called for? Oh, perhaps it was Chrono checking in on me. No, he made no mention of the sort. I am on my own here. So… who called?

“I know you don't like us touching things in your office but one of the Cat Sith was nearby and heard the ringing. They entered and climbed on top of your desk, it was your phone. And now you've showed up. Seems like this must be a new job for you. Although you should rest a bit more before getting back to work.” Damn it all. I have none of the clairvoyance the Chrononaut has. I don't know if this is according to the flow of time or not. Is she supposed to be receiving calls right now? The timing is unfortunate but I will hear it out, she would after all.

“Well I suppose I'll run over to my office and see if they call back.” She nods at me and the Cat Sith rubs against my leg. No, it’s a different one. This one is carrying a tray. A tray of pastries.

“Take one of those and head to your office, we can get you a proper meal later. I'll swing by after one of my familiars tell me when you get the call. Ta ta for now Cass and welcome back!” She floats off into the greater hall behind her. Roll with it. I reach down and grab a cookie from her servant. Cassandra was always particular about these sweets. I head off into the other direction and make my way to “my” office.

Although I've never been in this room, it's all there in my memories. Here I am, in the belly of the beast. Now, who is foolish enough to call me? All of these files, books, work, garbage scattered all over the desk. What a cluttered mind. I have to give her credit, it's taken this long to crack. Soon, soon it will be mine. I wonder if Daphne or Cassie will show up. I can't imagine Althea wouldn’t tell those two. Well for now, just play your roll.

I settle into my desk chair and fiddle with the various files on top. I've experienced all of these

inside and out but now a new case might fall right into my lap. I can't get over the coincidence but I can't act out of line either. Relax, what are you so worried about? It's fine. I set the cookie down on the desk. I will not be bested by Althea. I have never been bested in the history of the universe and I never will be! I've copied her personality perfectly. My speech pattern and lexicon are reflecting hers. I am Cassandra Watson. That being said, there is not much for me to do. Perhaps there's some busy work for me while I wait for this call. Or maybe I could just rest and see what the new day brings me. I opt to make a pillow out of my hands and rest my head inside them. If I could speed up time this would be great. Oh well, no point in worrying. I will discover the secret to time travel, it can't hide from me for much longer.

The air is changing, I feel it. The door hasn't opened. Floating around me is the scent death. It's fortunate that I placed my face in my arms and didn't lay them on top to the side. The atmosphere is suffocating, what incredible pressure. This feeling is unmistakable. Althea is already suspicious. I can feel eyes crawling over every inch of this body. Above me, under me, in every shadow, nook, cranny, behind every book and every folder. A pair of eyes stare at me, hoping I'll do something out of place. She doesn't trust her own friend. She might as well be holding a knife to my throat.

Ring Ring Ring

The monstrous atmosphere vanishes, I suppose I'm being saved by the bell. Ok, naturally, like you've done this for the past hundred years. I slowly raise my head with a yawn. Let the Cats have no suspicion either. Fool them all to kill them all. The phone continues ringing, I haphazardly reach for the top and pull it up. Another yawn pushes out the air in my lungs and I answer.

"H-hello? You've reached Cassandra Watson."

"Watson, it's me. I need you to go to a minor disruption in Toronto, Canada. There's a team set up for you when you arrive, call the usual number. The local team will guide you through everything. Some sort of creature is causing a ruckus and they can't deal with it. Room 810. Find it, stop it, call

back when it's done.” Aion?! She’s back already? She waited no time at all to give me more work. I figured Cassandra finally reappearing would've gotten her some time off but this? I'll let Althea know and hopefully she'll join me on this “case.” Then, when I get a moment with her alone, I'll kill her and have her vessel violated. I will leave no chance for her to return. I will return her to the Void.

I head out of my office and into the halls of Atlantis. Is it supposed to be so warm here? I haven't noticed it until now. This is odd to think about but I am unsure if this is how it felt in her dreams. Stop thinking useless thoughts. I need to prepare my attack. In fact, leaving may be the best option. Althea has eyes crawling over me already, fair to say this is her domain. The Fae here work for her. The shadows keep her secrets well. Speak of the devil, there she is now, walking towards me down the hall. It would be fair to think she knows of the call, considering she said earlier. Well, wave your hand and smile at her, there will be time for foolery later.

“Yo Althea hey, I was just about to ask around for ya.”

“Oh, what for Cass? Need anything?”

“That call came in. Aion has some sort of job for me in Canada so I guess I'll be heading off in a bit.”

“Oh Canada? Where in Canada? I've been there before.” She remarks.

“Toronto. I think it's the capital of Canada.”

“Ufufu, I think you mean Ottawa. Although I can understand the confusion. Toronto is the most populous city in Canada.” Oh this mindless drivel, who the hell cares? They're both idiots and I am acting as an idiot. I am an idiot.

“Would you like to join me this time around? I don't think Aion would care and it'd give us some time to catch up.” My prize after conquering Althea will be this body. Time and space will be mine. My wait will soon be over.

“You'd like me to join? Well I'm not much of an investigator or anything. I don't think I’d fit in.”

“Please Althea, it'll be fine. I'd like some company anyways, it's been so long since I’ve been able to just chat with someone. And when we finish the case we can gather everyone and celebrate!” At least one of us will be celebrating.

“I don't know what I would do Cass. It's not like I'd be good at it as you.”

“Ok how's this? You can be my partner. Keep watch on some areas I can't. Not too hard.” Althea puts her hand on her chin and looks up, I imagine she's thinking. It's one of the most stereotypical thinking positions humans have. You should be able to manage that Althea, just stand around and watch a door or something.

“I don't have to catch the bad guys right? I can ask you to?” She asks.

“Yeah, of course. Just let me know where they are and I'll deal with them. Aion doesn't ask me to take cases against really strong or evil people. They're usually manageable alone but even if something does get out of hand, I'll just let Aion know. She takes care of the big stuff.” Althea looks relieved by the news. Is she scared of something? She should be. She should be scared of me.

“Ok I guess I can watch but if anything happens I'm going to run!”

“That's totally fine, don't worry about it. Are you able to transport us there right now? Sooner we finish sooner we get back.”

“Ok, I'll draw up a portal. If you need anything grab it now Cass.” I nod at her and return to my office. Do I need anything? She usually brings a gun but I don't think I saw one in her office. I wonder where that went. Perhaps I could use a knife, it'll get some decent use. Plus that holster around my thighs will conceal it. Or maybe I’ll use a little magic, not like I need to actually solve this case. I just need to get Althea alone. Since she's open to the idea of being a guard dog I shall take her out back and end her like a dog. I look down at my hands and stare at them. The muscles pull back and forth with opening and closing. The weakness of flesh is both of our problem now.

I exit my room, returning to Althea. I suppose transportation to a current era city wouldn't take as much mana as her previous portal to another universe. What tome holds such secrets, I suppose I'll find out after killing her. Althea's eyes are closed, her right hand is held out over the floor. Her circle of magic is at work. I wait for her to finish her incantation.

"Ready Cass? What do we do when we get there?" Althea asks.

"Aion said to call her so I'll need access to a phone. After that she said a team would contact us. She's not big on details so..."

"Any phone will do?"

"Any phone, the number redirects itself, don't ask me how." I reply.

"And this team?"

"Likely the local authorities, Aion has a way of getting into everything. She's like their boss' boss so nobody will question it."

"Cass, enter the portal first. I will go in after and leave in a marker to return when we're done. You don't need to do anything, I'm just letting you know before hand. In case things go south, you know?" I nod at her and enter. The source of the magic feels different, she's not using ancient magic. Is this human magic? Interesting. In the moment of thinking I have, I arrived in at our destination. Cool winds and a fair sun greet my entrance as I wait for Althea to arrive.

It feels like it's taking her longer to show up than it took me to get here. Was preparing this get away route more difficult than the portal itself? Fortunately, she was smart enough to not place us in the middle of the city in a crowd. Aion certainly has no concern for others when she works. Several times in Tokyo she had sent Cass and herself into crowds. I suppose that's just Aion's haughty behaviour towards humans. Now that I'm here, I can't say I have a method of phoning Aion. No wait, I don't need to call her. I'm not here for her stupid case. I'm here to isolate Althea. What am I thinking? I stare down at my right hand again. It is mine. I took the body and yet I find myself

yearning for something. What is this feeling?

“Hey sorry for the wait, putting down a marker was more trouble than I thought.”

“Althea. So you're ready then?”

“Yeah, I put us slightly outside of Toronto. I don't think we'll have any on lookers. Plus check this out!” From her dress pocket she pulls out a mobile phone. I've seen these before.

There are less in this era than the future but we should be able to use it just the same.

“Want to give your boss that call now?” I didn't expect her to have this, I have no information on this. It seems I'm now forced to do Aion's work for her and deal with Althea. Very well. I will weave the web of trickery once more.

House of Wolves/2

It was just like she said during the call in my office. A team came out to pick us up. On the drive over they gave me the report for the job. It’s a missing child case. They took us straight to the scene. A child apparently went missing at their home in an apartment complex in a district called North York. The trail is completely cold, they had nothing to go off of so it’s in my hands now. As luck or perhaps fate would have it, I now have a perfect opportunity to test this body. My first victim, Althea.

The area is surprisingly quiet and orderly, this York road. People walking down the streets to various stores and restaurants. The surrounding buildings are surprisingly tall, and street lights line up along the road. Turning down into the suburban streets, we make our way to the apartment complex with the police. I ask for directions to the room of the missing child. They oblige and I head out to find the room. I instruct the team that came with us to stand by and wave at Althea to come with me.

Now, as we enter the elevator and exit on the floor of our destination, the hall that it opens up to is dark. Not pitch black but it's a more dim, mellow lighting set up. Look's like we're going into the later evening hours of the day. The sun is rising on the other side of the world. There aren't any windows except on the far ends where I assume stairwells are found. It's an eerie look. It feels akin to a strange twilight.

Anyways, as we arrive at the room, I give a few knocks on the white door so we can try to talk to the parents of the child. There isn't an answer. We don’t have a search warrant to forcibly enter the place either. Courtesy of Aion to only set up the bare minimum. We both turn around to return to the front office so we can further ask about the family that lives there. As we make it to the exit at the

stairwell, there is a terrifyingly loud crashing noise from down the hall.

There’s my probably cause to forcibly enter. I’ll make something up like, there’s some sort of provocation that requires my presence. We run back to the door, only to find it's now open. I peek my head inside and put my hand up to let Althea know she should wait. The room looks like it hasn't had anybody living inside it for quite some time. The furniture in here is covered up by white sheets. I see a light switch to the right of the door and switch it up. It doesn’t turn anything on. It’s incredibly odd but it's not going to stop us. I wave Althea over and we both begin to explore the room.

The windows are sealed shut, not locked, sealed. Otherwise, nothing looked out of the ordinary. We search from top to bottom but unfortunately, don't find anything out of place. Well, the entire room had felt out of place but there were no disturbances inside whatsoever!

Althea and I return downstairs after investigating. We let the guys we came with know about the situation and instruct them to ask their superiors back at the station about what’s going on. Maybe they got the wrong address. An answer quickly returns, they tell me something ridiculous. Instructions from the top won't be delivered unless I'm the one who asks. Fortunately, I still have Althea's phone so I give Aion a call. I ring her up and after some back and forth bickering, I return to Althea.

“What'd she say?” Althea says, waiting eagerly for the results.

“She said we are at the right place and the room number is correct. She also said maybe it was too confusing for me and that I had been asleep for too long so if it's too hard she'll take care of it. Yeah so, basically no help at all.”

“What do you think we should do? Should we go back up to search again?” She asks. As annoying as this is, we're both here now. I'm entrenched in the job and I can't just abandon it at this point without Aion intervening. Althea would also find it suspicious if I just left.

“Let's double check the room. Aion wouldn't be so insistent if there wasn't something there. She can be annoying but she wouldn't lie about work.” Althea nods at me and we return to the investigation. We make our way back up to the eighth floor and re-enter the odd room to search once more. It's just as unremarkable the second time and I shrug at Althea. I can't imagine what's in here, I don't even sense any magic at work. This is nothing more than a boring, empty room. I stop for a moment to catch myself. My stomach begins to hurt. For what reason am I in pain? Well it will pass, just deal with it. I have to focus.

“Althea, do you feel anything off about this room? Something special or hidden away?”

“I'm afraid not Cass. Not that I have a detective's eye like you but I don't feel anything in here. It's a normal room.” She shrugs at me and walks out.

“I'll be here, maybe something is in the hall.” I watch her leave and turn back around to face the room. What is your secret? It’s seemingly spotless but perhaps it's a matter of perspective. If I look at the room another way, I may find what I seek. How does it look when I exit? We are looking inwards but not outwards. “Hey Althea, would you shut the door?” I yell out of the room to her, hoping she'll hear me. She approaches the room and glares at me.

“This is still an apartment complex Cass, you can't just yell like that and bother everyone.” She replies.

“Oh, sorry. Would you close the door for me though?” She sighs and nods, pulling on the knob and obliging me. Other people? Who cares about that right now? I can't let Aion make me look like a fool.

It is much darker without the light from the hall. The shadows grow but divulge no secrets. I can see so little in the dark. I'm standing in an unoccupied apartment like an idiot. What's really going on here? Do I call Aion again and complain? Give her a piece of my mind and make her show up? Although I doubt she'll actually show... Well I guess I can ask Althea what she thinks. I make my

way out, setting my hand on the door and pulling on the knob. Wait a moment, something is on here. I can vaguely see something slightly above the surface of the wood. It place my finger on it and trace the shape. This is a letter. There's a letter on the back of the door. It's taped to the back with clear tape and blends in well with the white paint on the door. Is this what Aion wanted me to find? If so, it's absolutely, positively idiotic. I pull the letter off and tear it open. I push the door open to get some light on the paper.

“For those who have entered,

Sorry I can't meet you yet but I'm not quite done! I've seen you snooping around and speaking to staff. They can not and will not help you. You however, can keep this exciting! Let’s play a game. The girl, dreaming that she had been stabbed, became so frightened that she died of a heart attack in her sleep! Things are not as they seem here. Take a closer look at the room numbers or you will be punished.” I wave Althea over to take a look at this. Punished? Me? Who is this silly creature, hiding away to write poetry?

I hand her the letter and she reads over it. “Even if this is a joke we needed to treat it seriously. I have an idea.” She quietly murmurs something and out of the floor a black mass arises. After a moment a cat shows up. One of the familiars from Atlantis.

“I'll have this little one help out. Is that ok Cass?” Another pair of eyes lurking about, can't say I'm too enthused about it but I'll manage to deal with a cat.

“Have her walk around the perimeter. Look for things out of place, you know, like we did here.”

“Hear that little one! Take a walk and report back.” The Cat Sith wanders off on it's own, miraculously pushing to door to the stairwell open with it's shoulder. Now back to this hall.

“So, the room numbers? Are they switched around? Is that for the hall or the entire building? We might need to check every single room in here.” Althea begins her own inquisitive process, looking around the hallway.

“No, I don't think it's the entire building. I don't think it's every room either. Despite Aion's loose instructions, she was adamant that it was room 810. Do the room numbers next to, and across corroborate that this room we investigated was room 810? Althea check the room to the right of this, I'll go left.” She nods and we make our ways to our separate room. I have 807, I think my little theory is correct. Althea travels over to me and checks the number of my door.

“I had 811. This door is 807. Then in between should be 809. We have the wrong room, don't we Cass?” She says.

“Looks that way, someone did hide room 810. Wanna bet it's the room across from us?” I turn to face the opposite wall. “If this side was switched with odds and that side switched to evens then we might have our room. Let's check it out.” I say approaching the “correct” door.

Now we should be facing the right room. This room on the opposite side should have the family of the missing child. I knock but once again there is no response. What a surprise. Ok, how about this, I'll just open it. The actual surprise is that it’s not locked. As we peak inside this room, it appears much more standard. The furnishings are uncovered. There is a tv set and I can see a couple doors at the end of a hallway. Presumably to a bedroom and bathroom. The only thing missing are the people that should be living here.

Althea goes deeper into the apartment to search. I take the front area which is just the living room and kitchen. I make sure to check the back of the door to this room. Nothing on it this time around. I check out the fridge and find numerous types of food. Perishables that had expiration dates coming up in a few weeks. They were somewhat recently used too. The milk is half empty, the butter is half used. Althea shuts a door and we reconvene in the living room.

“I've searched high and low Cass but there is no deus ex machina note on any door this time. How did your search go?” She asks.

“There’s evidence of people living here but where the people are is a mystery. I'm not sure why

but this room feels even more unnerving. It’s like whoever was inside just vanished.” No, what are you thinking, you're not worried, not scared. Whatever is here is not even a quarter of a tenth of a millionth as horrifying as you. Perhaps Althea is close but, I shall ascertain how soft she has become during all her time wasted with humans. My stomach starts to turn, it hurts. Why does it hurt? Annoying. Perhaps I am hungry. Prolonged periods of time without food makes these organs cry out for sustenance.

So now our issue is we have a missing family. That’s on top of the mistaken room that was strangely vacant. We leave the room and Althea suggests to head back to the front office to ask about the residents here. Our return outside greets us to the display of a few more dispatched cars. A couple of force members are currently chatting to the lady in the office while a few others are standing outside.

Althea and I get talking to them and we share what we had learned. The sun was finally blending into the horizon to set. The final robust trails of orange and blue mix together in the sky as darkness slowly crawls over from the other side. One room was void of life and the other had the unmistakable linger of life. Where did everyone go?

After the two police inside return from the staff after talking they were only given useless information. Things like “I don't know, they were here yesterday, yadda yadda.” Unfortunately, it looks like we won't be adding any additional clues to our reservoir from the employees. Nobody had anything new. I ask Althea to to go back inside with me so we can give things another search. Worst comes to, we'll just try again tomorrow. Upon entering again I remember something I thought of earlier. There is another door at the opposite end of the hall. Presumably another side to exit through the stairwell.

“Hey, Althea, would you mind watching that door to the other stairwell? I don't know if it's a stairwell but would you watch it anyways?”

“Sure, what do you have in mind? What do you want me to do?” She asks.

“Just keep an eye out for anything and anyone going upstairs. If they're suspicious to you then have one of the police question them.” I explain to her and then we go our separate ways for the time being.

I return to the mid hall area on the 8th floor where the swapped doors were. Going back into room 809, I give the room a thorough second search but nothing is out of order. The orange hues of light infiltrate from a window near the back of the room. As I stare at the window, I feel as if the atmosphere of the room changes. As if the room’s dynamic shifted to a hollower container, sort of like a doll house. A near replica of what people might live in.

My attention is taken away from the room as I hear a male voice shout from out in the hall. I step out of the room and a policeman runs over to me. He lets me know that everyone who showed up has written their reports and they are going to take them back to the station. I assume that means no further evidence was found. Maybe that’s the best choice for now. A fresh set of eyes didn't help tonight so maybe a refreshed mind will tomorrow. I turned around to head back to the room staring around at things until I notice shadows on the wall opposite of the window. Not that it was odd, the last of evening light is pouring in from the western side.

They’re just mass-less forms of darkness, but you know, the human mind seeks out patterns. This is the phenomena of pareidolia, seeing things on objects that aren't really there. My gut tells me it looks like they form the numbers 8,0, and 1. I turn around towards the window, trying to identify what gave the shadows that shape. Maybe the blinds only being halfway flipped or the TV antennae partially blocking out the light. 801. We started in 809 but believed it was 810 at first. What if the room across isn't 810 either? What if all the rooms are mixed up?

But why would the room across of this one be unlocked? What is going on here? What am I missing? What's the link?

801 must be at the front of the hall by one of the stairwells. There is absolutely no basis for this, and acting on instinct is foolish but I want to check. I step into the twilight hallway again, noticing it kept the same amount of lighting regardless of the sun. It's almost comforting to know this hall stayed the same while simultaneously being strange.

I turn right towards the stairwell we entered from. As I stand before it, I begin to feel uneasy. Maybe because I talked myself into thinking that I saw something that wasn't in the other room. Because I knew what I was doing wasn't protocol. Regardless of my feelings, I still have this sense of responsibility and a desire to find this missing family. When did I start feeling this?

I knock on another unknown door, knowing my action would be futile. There is a part of me that hopes someone will open the door and relieve me of these ever dreadful growing feelings. I wait for a few moments then knock again. As I knock, I can only imagine what made the crashing noise from earlier. It could've been in any of these rooms. The two we checked earlier are clear. Only 18 more to explore.

After several moments of waiting, I make another judgment call. I slowly turn the knob, hoping it will allow me within. Slowly it complies, exposing me to a third room. I peek my head inside and silently take a step inside. If something is in here, I would prefer to notice them first rather than the other way around. Of course if they were staring at the door my actions would be meaningless. Fortunately or perhaps unfortunate, the door opens up to another hall. This hall must open up to the rest of the apartment room. The foyer is a few steps long but enough to hide a clear line of sight from either side. I keep my left hand hidden away, hovering over my knife holster. I hope that nothing on the opposite end of this room is waiting for me.

I step steadily, carefully, hoping to not reveal my presence until I absolutely need to. I reach the end and shimmy up against the wall. Sweat is running down my forehead. My palms are getting moist too. I'm afraid of peeking out over the wall, but I have to. I need to know what my brain had

seemingly seen in the shadows.

“3, 2, 1, go.” I countdown in my mind. Mental preparation to give me a little confidence boost. I peek into the room and stare into a similarly yet darker orange hued room. My sights immediately focus on the movement of something. I see the unmistakable white of sclera and blue iris’ stare at me. They make grunts as best they can and stare at me with worried glances. They’re tied up and gagged. I think I've found my missing family. They’re on the ground, seated in a corner of the room next to a bookcase. I suppose if they move the wrong way they could tip the bookcase and consequently have the bookcase crash on them.

I approach them, informing them I'm a detective with the city. Relief spreads across their faces as I try my best to cut the rope that had left them in bondage. I suppose bringing my knife along was a good idea for reasons like this. Although, their relief tells me something bad is going on here. I have many questions but for now I need them to be safe and secure. I raise my knife to their faces, cutting the trickiest area as best I can without injuring them. Fortunately I’m able to pull it out to the right side just enough to prevent any sort of facial reconstruction.

“Thank you detective! Thank you!” They say in unison. “But please, our daughter! She… Find her! Please save her you have to help her don't worry about us.” The mother shot the words from her mouth out at the speed of light. Her worry is genuine and backed up by terror. Her husband grabs her hand and placed his other onto her back. The stand up together and he takes her into the kitchen. He grabs a few cups out of their cupboard. He sits her down at the kitchen table then pours water into all the cups from some sort of jug on the counter. He hands one to his wife, then to me, then sits back down.

“I will ma’am don’t worry. Just calm down and breathe. Where is your daughter? Is this not your apartment?” Taking a seat, I ask them some questions. She didn’t say what was wrong with her

daughter. What does that mean?

"She… One second our baby girl was next to us, then we heard her screaming. We didn't know what to do everything was so sudden." The husband spoke up in place of his sobbing wife. I make some mental notes of what the couple says. The more I learn the less I understand.

"And regarding your apartment, is this not it? Do you stay in another room? Is she still in that room?" I need to press a bit further, truth be told we didn't have a single lead. These two just became our lead. As traumatising as the event was, they are the sole source of information we now had.

The wife begins rubbing her arms, the rope left impressions upon their skin. They were fairly pale skinned, with black hair and blue eyes. Any marks on their skin will be very obvious.

"Your room?" I ask again.

"No, this isn't our room. My wife fainted so I turned towards her and held her up so she wouldn't hit her head on the ground. I recall the sound of a door opening." Plausible. What else does he know about this and how did they get tied up together?

"A door opening? Where? To your room or another?"

"Well…I can't say for sure. We were in a panic. I was focused for a moment on my wife and just lost track of things." He does need time to rest and calm down. I should get the guys outside to help him if they're still here.

"Alright thank you for your cooperation. I would also appreciate it if you could describe to me what your daughter looks like. Any recognisable features?" I needed to at least know what I was looking for. The father began to speak up again.

"She wears her hair in a ponytail. Hmm that's not very helpful I suppose." I raise an eyebrow in curiosity. I'm going to figure the wife will say the same thing if anything.

"Anything else? Anything at all. No detail is too small." What is going on here. They can't

describe their own daughter? Is this what shock is like?

"Her scrunchie. It has a heart on it." He sighs and trails off, looking down at his feet. His wife then buries her face in her palms and the noise of a human in pain attacks my heart. If I press for more they might become uncooperative with me. Perhaps now is the moment they need to gather themselves. Push them too far and humans behave more emotionally charged.

"Alright thank you for your cooperation. I would also appreciate it if you could, when you're ready, cooperate with the local authorities here as well. I'll bring them up for you." I shut the cover on my mental notebook and give them what I hope is a reassuring smile.

"And our daughter?" The father brings his head back up.

"I'll get right back to investigating that. I'm going to let the police know you're here. Please wait for them, they'll take care of you." They nod in unison then join hands at the table. I want to get back to room 807 and 818, but I need to let the boys downstairs know first. Huh? 818? Why did I just think that?

I turn back towards the foyer and leave the room; I didn't do this as I entered but I shut the door this time around. I stare into the peaceful environment that the hallway has represented so far. I looked over at the door and wall around 810. Nothing out of the ordinary now makes it feel extraordinary. Why is there nothing blemished? The carpet, walls, doors all look fine. I head down the stairs, and to the officers still here what I had discovered. Two return to their spots at the entrances/exits of the building, one went out for some food and drinks. Althea comes by and another officer returns from the administration office of the apartment complex.

I instruct one officer to go find with the couple. He will assist them as needed and will eventually take them to the station. Althea and I will head back to the two mystery rooms in middle of the hallway. Why were we sent here first? How did we receive info for these two rooms when the family lived in totally different room? I elect to return to 810 and my partner obliges in taking 809.

We agree to leave the doors open so we can shout any findings at each other.

As I return to the hollow room, I notice the sun has finally changed shifts with the moon for the night. I didn't look for the light switch before so this time I'm going to try illuminating the room. Searching along the wall to the room I can only think of the shadows that showed me the numbers 801. I fail to find anything this time, but I begin to think of the placement of the furniture in the room. It's similar to the room across the hall. The TV set and windows appear to be in similar positions. I walk out and call Althea over from the other room to tell her what I'm thinking. We compared the rooms with a sketch in a notebook she had received from the officers and sure enough, they match up. The silhouettes match up, although they face the other way in 809. 810 with its furniture dressed up in white cloth seemed to be a phantom of the room across from it.

So I was looking on the wrong side in 810, the light switch should be on the left side of the wall. Strange that it would be behind the door. Everything is flipped but the door. I suppose it keeps the appearance in the hallway consistent. My partner returns her focus on her room, and I begin the investigation of mine. I take note of a wardrobe in the far-right corner of the room. Did Althea check that earlier? Maybe I should give it a look too. Upon getting up close and personal with it, the right door isn't pushed in all the way. Did she leave it open? I step back and carefully eye the wooden cage. I put my hand down on my knife and prepare myself for whatever is inside.

My hand is wobbling over the backside of the grip. I feel my breath get heavy and my head getting lighter. If something is in here, something bad, I need to be ready for it.

I raise my blade and prepare for the worst. I gently pull on the uneven wardrobe door with my left hand and stare into the belly of the furniture. My first impression comes from an ambrosial aroma crashing into my face. A very unusual odour to encounter in such a suburban area. Upon looking into the wardrobe itself, it's mostly empty. A few coat hangers on the metal closet rod and down below sits a briefcase. A fairly large, bright red briefcase. You couldn't miss this thing if you

tried. It stood out so much compared to the dull colours that surrounded it. It has a number lock on the face where the handles are. Three slots for three numbers. I pick it up with my left hand, taking mental note of its weight. It isn't very heavy, but I wouldn't say it's light either. I set it down on the floor in the middle of the room and call my partner over, asking if something similar is in her room.

She quickly runs back over but returns empty handed. So I've found something in this "mirror" room that wasn't reflected. One of the policemen also shows up, letting us know about the arrival of food and drinks. We mark both rooms off and I go down the hall to fetch the cop who is at the opposite exit. I tell him he can go on a short food break but I'm met with denial. He wants to ensure nothing suspicious travels in or out of any of the doors on this floor. I suppose it's nice that someone wants to keep watch and give him my appreciation.

I travel back to the mysterious room. I'm far too curious about what is in this briefcase. You know what they say about curiosity, but we've searched this whole place like headless chickens all evening. I wanted at least one piece of definitive, tangible evidence to bring back.

I crouch down and lift up the red case, staring at the three inputs to unlock the thing on both sides by the handle. I've done nothing but encounter three number combinations here, if there was one to choose, it would be the one the room itself told me. I take a deep breath and slide the numbers into position. 801 on the left and 801 on the right. Sure enough, both sides click, enabling me to lift the top open. My stomach drops, this is where the previous odour is coming from. Reeking with the scent of a disturbingly sweet yet dry and metallic smell, the briefcase's upper area is covered by this substance. The lower portion contains a menacingly dark, black bag. I press my right index finger into it and feel it press back into me. I sigh and set the briefcase down, falling to my bottom and staring into the void the wardrobe had left me with. Emptiness.

I take a deep breath and make my peace. Delivering the news won't be an easy task. The outlook on things here has just gone from grim to dismal. If there's a silver lining, it would be that we found

out sooner rather than later. Although nobody wants to outlive their kid, especially like this. I pick myself up and head back into the hall. An eerie silence complimented my return trip back down to everyone else. The hall feels like it's shrinking as I approach the elevator. The cadaverous end of the building holds the same dour secret as I.

Before the Night is Over/3

Althea is waiting for me outside of the door at the bottom of the elevator. She is holding a file in hand. She gestures at me to take it.

“What's this?” I ask her as I take it from her.

“File from the police station, some interesting info from the family doctor in here.” “The police talked to the family doctor?”

“Apparently. Oh by the way, Cat Sith found an underground parking lot underneath the facility. Vehicles can only get in from the outside. People need to take the elevator down to get to it on the inside.”

“Alright, maybe another place to take a look. Hey, you're not tired are you Althea?”

“Me? Oh no, I'm quite alright. Although you should eat Cass, they did bring you food too you know.”

“I'll eat and read the file. Would you please grab my food for me for me Althea?” She nods and wanders off to grab my decadent meal. Let's see here. I open the folder and skim through most of what's inside but stop at the Doctor's clinical diagnosis. Alright, July 31, 1995 at 10:05am.

“I suspect it may be Ganser Syndrome however, I don't believe she is faking all of the symptoms. She has displayed symptoms of Psychosis, namely Schizophrenia and Capgras Delusion. We have confirmed the police report where she doesn't believe her sister is the same person, that she's been replaced and a stranger is in her home. She can identify everybody other than her sister. She wholly believes that her sister has been replaced, as if an alternative version of her exists somewhere.” A hand floats in front of my face and begins to slowly wave. I guess it was there but I hardly registered it. She has a sister? I didn't see anybody else in that room. There are no mentions of her

either. Has she moved out on her own?

“Cass? Hey don't zone out on me fufu!” She holds a bag with my food inside over my face.

“Oh, right, the food. Sorry, I was thinking about this girls medical diagnosis. There hasn't been any mention of a sister but she's apparently in this report?” Something about being able to identify everyone but a single person. Humans only have so many protections against trauma but there's no protection against reality.

“You didn't see a girl who fit that description when you found the family right? One of the policemen earlier only mentioned the father and mother in the room.” Althea says. I nod at her.

“Althea, what's your take on this? I thinking there's something bigger going on here than we were lead on to believe..”

“You know I hardly ever look into things like this. I just have a feeling something is off and well since you're the head of all things weird, strange and paranormal it's your job to solve it right? Let's just go back in time and find out what happened. Please?” She asks. I suppose her “Cass” would go along with it. Taking orders without questioning them seems to be her specialty after all.

“Ok, fine we'll go look. Let's get this over with quick. I'd love to get back to my office and rest.” I bluff to her.

“Oh well with your talents I'm sure we won't take too much time there.” She needs to alter the flow of time to see what happened in this case. This is unfortunate, I've not yet discovered this body's secrets to control the flow yet. I may have to trick her.

“My talents, right. How about I head up first and take a peek? Then I’ll get you and share my findings. You know it was hard enough finding my way back here Althea, I'm not exactly operating at 100%.” Although would I be able to pull off a trick sufficient enough to fool Althea's senses? Maybe I should cast a glamour? Damn it, I'm in a corner.

“Well? Are you in Cass?” She asks again. I look up at her and nod.

“Yeah, I'm in. Just let me finish my food.” I've bought a few minutes at best. Althea turns around and focuses her attention elsewhere. Maybe I can leave some suggestions in the officers minds to create a suitable distraction. The night is still young, the air is calm and the atmosphere is quiet. Anything would create a commotion in these conditions. Perhaps now is the best time to isolate Althea. If I get her to believe I'm going back and trick her there, I may have a whole second of time to attack. Something brushes against my leg and I reflexively look down. The cat is here. The cat will also work against me. I wonder what can I do against them. It wanders over to Althea and their exchange is somehow more in depth than our talk.

Althea returns to me with a smile on her face. I don't like that air of confidence she's exuding. Does she know? Nonsense, I'm only freaking myself out. She knows nothing. The worrying feeling travels to my stomach and I feel like I'm in pain. The feeling is actually enhancing the pain, they almost feel linked to one another. Is the food making me feel worse? I can't believe how fickle these things are. What a weak, pathetic body you have Cassandra Watson.

“Zoning out again huh Cass?” Althea stands before me once more. She must have moved while I was focusing on the pain within me. Through my very core it hurts, I can even feel it in my back. I need to deal with this case and Althea. I can't let a stomach ache deter me.

“Good news though, our little friend here has found something in the parking garage! We won't need to walk around blindly for once! Let's check it out!” Althea strides into the apartment lobby. She seems excited. Now that I think about it, it's the perfect area to isolate her. She's sending herself to her own demise, perfect.

I leave my food behind and follow my victim into the lobby. She's waiting for me by the elevator with the cat in her arms. I hadn't noticed this earlier either but the floor is incredibly reflective. The janitorial staff certainly earn their wage. It feels more like a mirror than a floor. Isn't that funny, another mirror in this building. Althea isn't looking at me, she’s looking away. The cat looks fairly

uncomfortable in her arms. I wonder why its making that face. Finally I look at myself, I look as if I'm giving myself the side eye. Is this body aware I'm not it's true owner? Do I not give myself trust worthy looks? Fascinating, if I care enough about it later, I'll do something about this face.

“Well, shall we, Cass?” She taps the elevator button for the parking garage and we wait a little longer, listening to the pulling of the cord beyond the metal doors. With a ding, it opens up and we step inside. Althea hits the button to keep the door open, setting her familiar down.

“You keep guard here ok? If anything bad happens you come get us ok?” Althea says to her familiar.

“Nya!” The only word these things ever say, if it even is a word. She pets it and stares forward.

“Think we'll find some sort of breakthrough down here? We've been mostly running around with our heads chopped off.” I say to stray her attention from me.

“Oh Cass, so pessimistic. I think you've picked that trait up by spending too much time with Aion. Don't forget, we can just time travel if we're too lost.” I nod at her affirmatively. I suppose we could time travel but I'll be returning to the future. Not going to waste another minute on this worthless missing human. The elevator dings once more and the doors open up to a nearly pitch black room. The only light was coming from inside the elevator. I look down at the ground and stare at our shadows, the first things to enter this new area. I feel like I had to stare at them. Light was above and behind us, enabling the projection but Althea's looked off. As if her shadow was glitching out. I blink and her form returns to normal. It was the outline of her body but I am certain Althea's shadow appeared as if her head was splitting open and tentacles were exiting out of it. I turn back to look at her and she tilts her head curiously at me.

“Something up Cass?” I don't feel any magic. I haven't felt any since we arrived. That's the most strange thing, everything is almost normal. The room numbers were switched as if a kid was pulling a prank on us. There was a murder apparently by a supernatural force? It's odd sure but, why did

Aion need me to do this?

“Are you sure this is the right place to be investigating Althea?” I step into the garage and look around. The lights above shutter on as I cross into the lot. Must be some sort of motion detection to conserve energy. Althea's steps echo behind me as she follows me in.

“It's here. The Cat Sith can't lie to me. How about you go right and I'll go left, we'll meet back here in say, 10 minutes? Sooner if either of us find anything?”

“Sounds good. See you in a bit then.” We go our separate ways and walk into the different halves of the garage. It's full of cars but scarce of people. In fact, we haven't come across many people at all today. It feels like this apartment complex is fake. These cars are nothing but props. The front office is full of useless people. The police had two different reports. The room numbers were wrong. Was the set not complete in time for my debut? Haha oh well. Althea will be focused on searching for clues and I will search for a way to kill her.

I pull the knife from my holster and stare at the blade. I could utilise the void here. Manipulate the space between nothingness and turn this knife into a full void weapon. I don't think she has a defence against that. It's impossible to defend ones self from the unconscious. Alright, it's decided. My hand flips the knife around towards myself but my stomach began to ache again. I lower the blade back into its holster and wrap my arms around my stomach. This pain is getting to be too much. I can't do it right now, it's preventing me from doing anything. I feel like there's something sitting on top of my stomach. It's as if my middle section was being wrapped a thousand times over and then squeezed tightly. And even worse, the feeling is piercing into my back again. The entire lower half of my body is crying out. I fall to my knees, gripping my stomach as tightly as I can. It feels like my insides are falling out of my body and being stuffed back in incorrectly. As painful as this is, I won’t let it stop me. I will shift the source of pain. I can't let this stop me. This is my chance to kill Althea. My chance...

I reach for my knife once more and stab it into the palm of my left hand with all of my strength. The blade cuts clean through to the other side and is excruciatingly painful. It successfully shifts the feeling away from my stomach. Fuck! Useless body of flesh. Perhaps I should return to a proper vessel after this and steal the secrets of her ability a different way. With the blood from my wound I draw my spell circle. This will be suitable, it's all I got. I grip the knife with my wounded hand, stand back up and begin the chant.

"Hup mggoka ya 'bthnk ot lw'nafh ng nogephaii l' ya r'luh l' ah'n'gha ya mghri ot syha'hnahh mgepog" The knife in my hand shines with a macabre light, overpowering the florescence and-

I hear the sound of my blade hitting the ground. A hand grabs my neck and shoves me down. I can't react in time. My head crashes into the pavement, is this our villain? Who dares attack me?! With eyes pitch black, her form is reminiscent of the void in space. Althea stares at me. No expression, no sound. I put my hands on her arm, attempting to get her off of me. I'm sure she wasn't nearby, how did she hear? How did she notice?

"Wh-what gave it away?" I squeeze my voice out of my neck, her grip constricts me like a snake.

"You've been leaving behind a trail of blood." I've been what? Since when? What the hell?

"I've... been bleeding? But I've only just been injured. I don't understand." I cry out in confusion.

"You have overlooked one very simple thing, Faceless One." She responds.

"What is that?!"

"Cassandra is a woman in her late teens."

"What does this mean Althea? What have you done to me!?"

"I have only confirmed my suspicions. There is only one investigation here and it is my investigation."

"Althea! Oh you damned creature! Forever a thorn in my side! How I loathe to be runner up in a competition where I am the only performer! Your disgusting, duplicitous form is hardly even hidden

away by that slender, sinister, shuttering form of humanity. The length you have gone to humiliate me will not easily earn my forgiveness in the future. Oh woe am I to have taken a vessel of chthonic property rather than a simplified ouranic vessel. My defeat is due to my ignorance, not your genius. The cavernous flesh I carry is a weakness I did not consider and now I am to pay the price of failure. No matter what I had in store for you, you never perceived danger. Though often I am the messenger, fate twists around you and you have delivered it to me. The horrible grin that sits a top your face will haunt me in my restless dreams. No longer the stalker for I have become the stalked. It is impossible to fool Truth."

"I've no time for ramblings of insanity, Nyarlathotep. Return my friends body at once." Not here. Not like this. I refuse! I pull the shadows of the garage to me, coalescing them into a mass of darkness. I need the blade. I must escape. Being captured means death. Death means the body returns to *her*! As quick as I move my hand, Althea strengthens her grip around my neck and raises my body.

With just her single hand around my neck, I am now suspended in the air. Fortunately, I have the knife in hand but I am not quick enough to cut through her. A tentacle stretches out from her back, thieving the weapon I held. It all happened so fast. Never for a moment did I notice I laid out my own demise. How unfortunate, for it to end this way. All the years that have come and gone, now useless. Althea swings the blade across my face. My skin burns at the point of entry but being modified by my magic, it phases through my head. It didn't harm her, at least not outside of a couple cuts. I am bearing the brunt of the damage, my form itself is being attacked. She lets go of me. I fall to the floor and stare at her bewildered. Is this mercy? Is she not going to finish me off?

"Where did you come from? How did you abduct Cassandra Watson's body?" I spit on the ground, laughing at her.

"Answer me fiend!" She shouts.

“I have no answer to give to you. It is my secret. I will carry it into The Dreamlands if I must, Althea.” She crouches down over me and raises the blade to my neck.

“We both know if I kill you here, you have to restart. For time immemorial you have been working, do you really want that to all go to waste? Do you really want to start over from the beginning Nyarlathotep?”

“What do you care Althea? I'm already dead. Finish it.”

“I care because this human you are possessing is my friend. She means something to me. It is my duty to protect her.”

“Protect her? Ah I see, that is why a part of her is missing. You created the void in her. Unfortunately, that void allowed me to take up residence in here. Fantastic work Althea.”

“You never even looked at the name of the child in this case did you?”

“Why would I? I only needed to appear as if I was working in earnest. I had no intention of ever solving this case like your beloved Watson.”

“*Hana Plytorte*. You looked her parents in the eyes and told them you'd find their daughter.”

“Oh bother, I lied to a couple of humans out of the trillions that will go on to exist. What a pathetic creature you've become Althea. Perhaps you have spent too much time around these bags of water and meat. Let me ask you, do you think about the trash when you’ve thrown it away Althea? Oh no, the garbage is gone how will I survive now!? Do you dig in and look for what you’ve gotten rid of? Of course not! What absurdity to think that even a single one of these worthless creatures can occupy even a single thought in my head after I have thrown them away. I have obtained the only body I will ever need and when I master her ability I will return and cease my thoughts of you as well!”

“I would worry less about me and more about yourself. Or perhaps you would enjoy death? Get a fresh start, turn a new leaf.”

“Oh, we both know I will return here. Her body is no longer her own. Her words are my words. Her actions are at my instruction. Her body, mind and soul are all tools for me!”

“A fool and their head are easily parted!” Althea shouts, she's going for the killing blow.

This is no issue however, I understand what she values here. If I swap consciousness with Cassandra Watson she will still her hand. I know the risk is great and returning control to her is not ideal but I can keep her dreaming. I can continue my work despite the failure here.

I wasn't sure how close the blade got but I can feel myself shrink as Watson returns. The faint sound of the blade dropping and crying is all I can hear. Enjoy your victory Althea. I will fade into nothingness until she dreams again. We must return to The Witch's House, I need my vessel to be induced into The Dreamlands again. To fail at the very end, just as Aion did. The power of Cassandra Watson is fearsome, should she ever learn to use it at will, what a horrifying being that would be. A bitter pill to swallow. Indeed, beauty doesn't last forever.

Piece of Soul/4

“Did you feel that? The computer is showing Cassandra's consciousness now. Looks like the test run was a failure Chrono.” A voice breaks the silence in the computer room.

“Yeah, yeah, it certainly looks that way. Guess I'll go get her… them.” I reply.

“She needs to be treated. She has wounds on her head, neck and it looks like she's going through her, ahem, time of the month. Be gentle.” She informs me.

“Hey c'mon, what do you take me for? I got it. I'll jump over and get her before Aion wakes up. I can't deal with her right now so hold down the fort Morg.”

“Ok-” The response barely grazes my ears as I snap my fingers. Instantly I appear before my heroic Eldritch monster and junior time traveller.

“Wh-what? Who are you? Why are you here? How did you get here?” The girl asks me. “Alethea, I presume? Oh sorry, you spell it Althea.” She nods her head wearily, holding Cassandra Watson in her arms.

“I'm Chrono. An associate of Aion's. I'm here one, Miss. Cassandra Watson, in your arms there, so if you don't mind.” I motion splitting the two of them apart and picking her up. She doesn't look to happy about that though.

“An ally of Aion? The same Aion that tried to end the universe and kill Cass?” She asks in a distraught voice.

“Right, so when you put it like that, it sounds really bad. But it’s not. Aion is currently recovering, she's of no threat to anybody. I'm going to have Cassandra heal up the same way so she can go back to her duties.”

“Her duties? Was saving the universe not enough? You have more work for her?”

“Is that not the trap you laid for Nyarlathotep here? Immediately sending them to work?” I reply. She scoffs and turns her head towards the fledgling time traveller. I sigh and slowly walk over to them. I crouch down to be level with them.

“I get it. A lot of strange things suddenly happened and now you're here, wondering why I'm here. I'm really just here to help Cassandra out. She needs treatment, special treatment. She'll only get it with me. You sliced her with that void blade didn't you? Even if it was to stop the monster with it, it'll still leave a scar on her soul. I can help. It's my job to help.”

“You're Chrono? The God of Time right?”

“I'm flattered that you know of me. I'm not as rambunctious as Aion, promise. But yes, we both preside over time. I have nothing to hide. No ulterior motives here. I just have something of a, kinship, with Young Cassandra here. It's my responsibility to see her return to full health. Which, might I add, includes repairing her soul. Her entire soul.”

“I can't do that, without it I can't protect her. Cass is my first human friend, the first to accept me despite my past. It's my duty to protect her.”

“Hey, I understand man. I totally get it. But, without her entire soul, she's going to be wrestling for control with Nyarlathotep for the rest of her life. She needs to be complete. Althea, please. If you want to protect her, this is the best way.” She rests her head against her friend and sobs silently. I guess it's a lot to take in. Cassandra has only been around for 18 hours and is already leaving again. I stand up and turn away, letting them share their moment. I can come back later I suppose.

“Ok, this is for Cass right? You'll save her?” She asks with a sombre voice.

“It's my job to make sure she gets better.” I say confidently. I hope it relieves her.

“Promise?”

“I promise. Cassandra is the future. I need her. Aion needs her.” She grimaces at the sound of Aion's name again. Silence falls over the garage after following my words. No, it wasn't silent. It

was trying to be quiet. This is the sound of air being split by a blade. It appears she's not going to let me take Cassandra without some concessions. With a snap of my fingers, I reach for her weapon while time is frozen. A defiled blade covered by the muck of the void. This thing would really do a number on whoever has been hit by it. Grasping its hilt, I point it forward at her. Time resumes and we return to our stare down.

“So flawlessly done. I figured you would've noticed despite me hiding my attack in the shadows. In fact, I expected nothing less of your ability Chrono. I'm glad you noticed, that would've made this too easy.” She transfers ownership of the Cassandra to some freestanding tentacles growing out of her body, picking herself up to face me head to head. They cradle her within their cushiony flesh, she'll be safe there at least. Althea is only thinking of protecting Cassandra. So how can I get her to drop her guard?

“Hey, I'd really rather not do this. I'm not the fighting type love, I'm all about peace baby.” I tell her.

“Baby? Ew what the heck?” She replies less than enthusiastic.

“Ouch! Hey, I really am a peaceful guy! I don't like getting my hands dirty when I can avoid it.”

“I'm sure you avoid everything with your control over time. Free from any form of punishment, just like Aion. No concern for the world around you as long as you're ok, you do what you want, when you want. Am I right?”

“Freedom in a sense. I too, am chained to a fate I never asked for but I won't complain. I do what I want, when I want and all I must do is make time flow. A fair deal. How about we make a deal, not only for Cassandra, but for the fates of so many universes that had their flows cut short?” Taking me off guard, ethereal chains of darkness tie themselves around my arms and legs. They grab me more silently than death. I didn't even feel them crawl up my body. Not bad.

“Just like Aion, so arrogant. You love the sound of your own voice too, don't you?”

“Goodness Althea! We're moving so fast! At least let me get you a drink first!”

“No, if anything, you're less tolerable than Aion. You don't honestly think these two-bit lines impress any women do you?” She takes the blade out of my hands. Being struck by that thing would be rather nasty and I don't want to return with any injuries of my own. How can I throw her so off guard, she can't fathom that I'm a threat?

“I was hoping they'd show me off in a silly and familiar light.” Her corporeal body vanishes before me and reappears in front of my face. A strict glare is glued to her face, her eyes keen on me and whatever I may do next. The chains tighten around me and a solid punch is dug into my stomach. I try my best to keep my focus but I'm sure my face must've grimaced for at least a moment because I can hear a titter from her.

“Hey, I know people get into the heat of the moment and all but I didn't consent to BDSM or physical harm!”

“What on Earth are you saying? Are you crazy? This isn't sex, this is a fight!”

“Althea please, there are easier ways to my heart than through my chest.”

“Wh-what? How are you? Why are you?” I wink at her and smile, pursing my lips and blowing a kiss her way. She turns away in disgust, the opportune moment for me to persuade her a little bit more. I walk in defiance of the ephemeral chains, shattering them around my legs. I raise my arms to my chest, pulling on the chains and shattering their binding of me. Althea takes notice and quickly moves to strike me with the sword. Her two handed swing from over head comes down towards me, I push further into her, grabbing her right wrist with my left hand and pushing my right hand into her shoulder. She pushes into me with all of her might, I can feel the floor slide under my feet. I twist her blade hand downwards and create space between us. I let go of her shoulder and reach down with my palm open to take the weapon out of her hands. Her left hand reaches for me, trying to pull at my head. Unfortunately for her, she doesn't quite have the wingspan to touch me

with the gap I created. Even though my hand is on the sharp bits, I can handle a single cut. I bring my hand around in a circle and her wrist goes limp as I snatch the weapon from her. It rests on my arm, securely in my possession as our eyes lock each other down.

I grab the hilt and swing towards her, she has no time to react because I've removed the time that exists in between my movement. The blade hovers just above her neck, our eyes still locked on each other.

“You cheated.” She complains.

“Oh I assure you, I am quite loyal. Never two timed a girl in my life! There's work to be done however. You have my employee. I just need her for a few jobs, then she's free.” She sighs heavily and her body relaxes. She takes a deep breath and raises her hands. I'll take that as her surrender. I lower the blade and flip it towards her, as a show of being a good sport.

“Ok, Chrono. When can we expect Cass to return to us? Will her freedom take long?” She asks.

“I won't lie to you Althea, it will be quite some time. Cassandra has exceptional skills and more often than not, time is on her side. That makes her perfect for what I need.”

“What kind of work? The same Aion made Cass do?”

“Along those lines yes but, I can tell you that her first job will be to repair all of the damaged timelines.”

“Fixing what Aion broke?”

“Right. I'll need to train her up a bit however and well with her possession, she's going to need to learn to deal with that as well.”

“Did Aion act alone? You didn't assist her did you?”

“Correct, Aion acted on her own terms. Although, she did charm a few Gods along the way. It's nothing I can't manage however. It'll be nothing Cassandra can't either. Now if that's all, I'd like to to return her now.”

“Ok Cass, you hear that? Chrono is going to watch over you now. The rest of us will be waiting for you to return. It'll be just like those halcyon days we used to have. Make sure to feed her, she didn't finish dinner.” Althea presses her forehead on Cassandra's, blood on her. The blood runs down into her eyes and mix with her tears. The streaks of red pouring down her face don't seem to bother her at all though as she lifts Cassandra up and hands her over to me.

“I'll take care of her. She's good. You know she's good. I'm going to make her better. We're at the End of Time so if you manage to make another portal there, you’ll know where to find us.” She nods her head again and steps back, waving goodbye to her friend. I snap my fingers from underneath and return to Ardor.

“Oh, that was quick. How's that hand injury?” Morrigan spins around in her chair with her comment.

“What injury?” I raise my hand, time having already reversed the damage left by the blade. I smile at her.

“Alls well that ends well. I believe that’s the saying. Althea knows Cassandra here can't be healed through normal means. Nyarlathotep had a void blade after all! Things could’ve gone very wrong down there.” I exclaim to her.

“Well you can rewind time and watch it, why don't you go do that?” She asks.

“It's only ever beautiful in the moment, Morg. If you went back to redo something, it loses that magic.”

“A..ion?” A voice calls from below me. Ahaha that's sort of cute.

“Sorry, I'm not Aion but I do get that a lot. You get some rest, I'll have you good as new.”

“She woke up.” Morrigan gets out of her chair and walks over.

“Goodness, compared to you and Aion she's a kid. And all this blood over her poor thing. I think she needs a bath first. Wanna take her?” Morrigan suggests.

“What? No! You take her, you're a girl. I'm not going to strip her down and wash her without permission!”

“What?! It's somehow ok for me to strip her because I'm a girl?” Morrigan is upset at the counter suggestion.

“Look we're, ok how about this. We'll wash her together? Fit her back into her outfit and let her rest in the medical pod?”

Peace of Soul/5

"After that, we washed you, put you into a pod and well, you know the rest." My eyes shut. I take a deep breath. I regain control from the enigmatic storyteller as they hand me the reins to the body. I don't know whether I should be incredibly embarrassed by what I've just heard or not.

The embarrassment is all your own doing.

My doing? You're the moron running around in my body bleeding all over the place! What the hell is wrong with you?

It is not as though I calculated for such an event. The unfortunate reality is this is the limitation of your near worthless body. Any other creature would've sufficed there but no you just had to heat up and become a slave to your biology in that specific moment? What cruel fate took my opportunity for freedom from my hands and shattered my future. It's unbelievable that such a trite thing was my downfall.

So you're a moron. But I already knew that.

It's your body. As I said,, it was entirely your fault Cassandra.

And the riddle? If Althea didn't already know you were a fake before that then not understanding what was written immediately flagged you.

It was not something… I didn't… It's not…I'm not dumb! I'm not!

Right. Well, I reckon that means I've beaten you twice then. The voice in my head returns no response. Despite what just happened I, no, we, have gained considerable trust between each other.

Whether it's due to being forced to get along because I'm under the constant supervision of multiple gods or maybe because we're bonding, who knows. I can switch more easily and at will with her. The words, *I'm going to nap*, appear in my mind.

"Ah, that was very enlightening. I have no memory of anything that the other me had described.

Although I feel a slight relief knowing my body is still human.” I reply to Chrono.

“I'm also relieved to know that you're still you. What an amazing stroke of luck to not just survive once but separately on your own in a dream. I have a feeling there's still much to discover about you Cass. Don't die until you discover everything!” Chrono gets up and walks toward me. He pats me on the shoulder and heads off into the greater hall behind me.

“Hey Chrono?” I call out. The footsteps stop.

“What's up?” He responds.

“Do you know where Aion is?”

“Aion? Hmm, no sorry. She was never one to announce where she goes. Why not ask Morrigan?”

“Does she know about… me?”

“Ah, well, I don't think so? Why?”

“Just wondering. I'll look for Morrigan then.”

“See you later Cass.” The fire from the hearth is so comforting. They wouldn't let me but, I'd like to just sit here forever. My first friend here. Still watching over me. Guess I should get going too. I still need to return to Atlantis.

Althea and the others have been left in the dark for who knows how long. There is that portal straight to them. Maybe she’s come here before? So many thoughts run through my head, leaving me with an overwhelming anxiety. I'm just gonna go to the library.

I push the grandiose doors open to the magical book haven, looking for my target. Beyond the initial lobby area, the library opens up into the greatest assortment of literature that exists. Past, present and future. It's almost like an archive of humanity now that I think about it. Maybe that's all library's really are. An archive of human achievement. Shelf after shelf lined up in neat rows that span beyond my own sight. Each step echoes into each path made for each shelf until it fades into emptiness.

“Morrigan? Hey where are ya?” I shout out into the air, hoping she's nearer rather than farther from me. I wonder if I follow this path for long enough I'll reach some sort of treasure at the end. What treasure do I even want right now? A chest full of pirate gold, what good would that do me? Or would I prefer something, someone… If Aion were at the end of this path, would I be happy? Would I feel accomplished? Would I like for her to pull me into her body? To feel her arms around me? To kiss her away from everybody's sight?

“Hi, you were calling for me Cass?” Caught off guard I yelp.

“Gah, Morrigan. You scared me.” Morrigan sticks her tongue out at me and bursts into laughter. I don't get why I reacted like that. Life is challenging when you can't see the next move and here, I’m blind.

“Sorry, you were standing there daydreaming. It was the perfect opportunity.”

“Right. Have you seen Aion around? She just kinda vanished and I wanted to talk with her.”

“Aion? Hmm I think she's still in her room. *The* room.”

“*The* room? What does that mean? Is it not her room she sleeps in?”

“Well it depends, do you want to see Aion Aion or just Aion?”

“Aion, Aion? What?” I ask confused.

“The real Aion.” She replies.

“Oh right, the robot stuff or whatever it was. Why the hell does everyone have a body double? So where is she… they…?” Have I never met the real Aion then? Did I share some of my most secret, private parts of myself with someone that wasn't even there? What the fuck man?

“Both are somewhat around. The one that showed up the other day for the photo was the real Aion. I assume she came back to check on you. She probably sent her double to Earth to continue whatever was she was doing.”

“Didn’t her double leave after getting fixed though? What's going on?” I ask, desperately trying

to get a clear picture of what's going on.

"I couldn't tell you. Nobody knows what she does. Aion comes and goes. You're one of the few that ever got her to settle down. I would say you know more than I when it comes to her."

"Oh, then her room. How do I get to her room?" I ask her.

"You don't know? Seriously? Didn't you two fight to the death there?" She replies with a surprised tone of voice.

"Fight? You mean her room is her Phantasm?"

"Yeah." She casually replies.

"What?! Seriously?"

"Aye. The very top room of the castle is hers. Well, everything is hers. She built it all. The castle, the reverse castle, everything. The benefit of being able to manipulate time." Aion did everything. Every single step of the way, Aion is behind something I've been a part of. It's just like she said on that day.

"How do I get to the top, to her room, from here?" I ask with the hopes that I can finally get a moment to speak with her again.

"I don't think there's a direct way up there besides the time machine, which you can only access in her room anyways." She answers me and dashes my hopes.

"Aion just shows up in there?"

"Yeah, manipulation of time and space. Nifty innit. She doesn't need a summoning circle or anything like that to teleport. You should know a little about that, Miss. Time Traveller."

"I can't really control the flow at the end of time. I lucked out against Aion once and that was nothing short of a miracle really."

"Hmm, I'm sure you'll think of something. I would fathom a guess that if you were to get closer to her room, you may find it easier to reach her. There is sort of a way up but it's not as filled out as

the rest of the castle.” I like the sound of that. If Morg can get me closer then maybe I can push myself inside.

“Oh? Do tell me more Morrigan.”

“Chrono has this makeshift trolley that sends food up. It's box. Not a large box though. You might be able to just barely fit into it and he can send it up. It doesn't go directly to the door though, it goes to just outside of the door. The top of the tower is a rather unstable area due to its time, space, whatever distortion. You should be fine though.”

“Thanks Morrigan. I'll go ask Chrono then. I was just talking to him so he shouldn't be far.” Morrigan walks up to me and wraps me in a hug. I feel myself getting flustered, I didn't expect that. I hug her back. I let go of her then she lets go of me. I run off back to the main hall, waving my hand back at Morrigan. Am I looking harder than I should be for treasure?

The main hall's entrance doors open at the same time as I exit the library. Chrono and the guard girl Iwako are chatting with each other. A rich blast of icy airy settles into the room, it gives me an electrifying feeling. I wave at the two and they wave back, walking over to me.

“Cass, I was just telling Iwako here about the time Morrigan and Aion hosted an Atlantean princess.”

“A WHAT? WHEN? WHO? CHRONO?” I run up to him, I can't hold back my emotions. I need to know everything.

“Cassandra please, settle down. We’ve already had story time today.” He chuckles with his reply.

“I'd like to know right now, Chrono.” I try demanding of him.

“You will in due time. Now ask me what you originally wanted to ask me.” What the fuck? This is important to me. Why doesn't he listen? We, ok, I guess we did talk a lot earlier. I can wait. It's fine. Aion then Atlantis.

“I'd like to go up and see Aion, would you help me get to her?” I ask him.

“Get to Aion? You mean up at the top of the castle?” He responds with questions instead of an answer.

“Yeah, Morrigan said she might be up in her room so I'd like to go.”

“I don't know if the Mistress would want you bothering her if she's at the top of the castle. She's very strict about anybody getting near.” Iwako chimes in and gives me some information. Since she's the guardian of the castle I suppose she knows a fair bit about Aion.

“That's true, Aion typically doesn't like being bothered, that goes double for when she’s up there. And besides that, can't you just teleport yourself in? Haven't you been in there before?” He asks.

“That’s… look I never entered on my own. I've only been summoned there.”

“I seem to recall you not only jumping to Aion's room but doing it from a parallel universe. Where's the Cassandra that did that hmm?”

“That was a wildly different situation. I was pressured, she was going to kill me. I had to.”

“Well you've done it once before, what's the harm in trying again? Consider this my first task. Enter Aion's room without any help. C'mon, let's leave the little time traveller so she can focus. Iwako, I say we should start fixing up some supper.”

“Ooo, let's do that. Good luck Cass. Sorry in advice if the Mistress chews you out!” She bows to me. Chrono laughs and the two carry on past me and vanish into the staircase. Alright, that was an exchange. Chrono is less than helpful to say the least. My first task huh?

How did I do it back then? Althea had forbade me from going to the end of time but I didn't know I could even do it on my own. Was it the watch? I don't even remember it clearly. I still haven't had the time to properly deal with all of the things I went through. All of that trauma and violence. To top it off, I'm actually getting butterflies in my stomach thinking about getting some one-on-one time with Aion. If I think about that room, do I end up in the room? Is that how it works? Would thinking about Aion get me in there? If I teleport to the room then my link is to the

room not Aion. But I want to get into the room because Aion's in there. If I go now does that mean my link is actually to her? I just can't stop thinking of questions. Maybe I need to just do it instead.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. The room Aion is in. The room we fought it. The room I almost died in. I can see the grains of sand. The light that pressed down on me and the darkness that shielded me. All of the words I shouted at her and the words she shouted back at me. Lovers to enemies before they had realised it. All of that time we spent together crashed into a spectacle of violence. I was certain of my death. She was toying with me. I can't believe that I'm standing here today after all that. After everything, I stand here hoping to go back to that place. I miss her. I miss her so much. I begin to notice that tears are falling down my face. I must look silly right now. Standing here in place, crying to myself. This is what I wanted, right? So do it. She's right there.

“Oh my, I didn’t expect any visitors today. Do you need something Cassandra?” A man's voice? Calm, smooth, soft, a little like Chrono’s. Hearing it brings me relief.

“Oh, hi. Who are you? I came to see Aion.” I feel my feet press down into the sand below. I made it. I did it!

“Ah, I’ve yet to make your formal acquaintance. I'm Hermes. I run things for Aion every now and again. Mostly when she's gone, busy and or just feeling too lazy.” He bows his head down at me and smiles.

“Hermes? I sort of vaguely recall Aion calling that name before. But why does she need you when she has Chrono?” Hermes turns his head to the side quizzically. Maybe that was a rude thing to say to someone I just met...

“Chrono? Well he's a more, how do I put it, recent, addition to the team? Aion and Chrono don't get along very well either. Bit of a sibling rivalry those two have. Both too proud to admit they need help and certainly won't ask each other for it.”

“Sibling? They're related?!” This shouldn’t surprise me as much as it is.

“As related as God's can be I suppose. Chrono is the elder of time and Aion the younger but it's more like Aion is Chrono's replacement.” I scratch my head, thinking about what I've just learned. Chrono is first, then Aion and according to Aion, I'm after her?

“So, what did you come for? I don't think Aion has made any recent requests for you.” Hermes says.

“I just want to see her. Chrono let me know she was in.” I give him my answer.

“Ah well she is indeed in but I'm afraid she's sleeping. I suppose you could wait for her to get up. Should be soon, I was actually just about to prepare her lunch. I could prepare some for you too. Here, lets continue this talk in the lobby.” He walks ahead of me and vanishes from the endless sea of sand. I follow shortly after him and, as if we stepped into a different set on a film lot. We’re now in a strange lobby. I swear I stumbled upon some sort of place like this before. I took a portal or something to get here last time.

“Wasn't there a portal to the lobby, what happened to it?” I ask.

“Oh, Aion was embarrassed by Chrono over it. Something about the portal being so jarring to look at. I suppose she caved into the pressure from his words because she asked me if we could change it. I fit it up with a little enchant that hides the entrances from whatever side you're in for her. See?” He points to the direction behind us from where we had just walked. There was only a blank, plain wall staring back at us. Neat I guess.

“Anything in particular you would like Cassandra?” He goes to the back of a bar counter and the sound of plates and glasses clinking into each other fills our dead air.

“I'll just have whatever Aion is having, I'm not too picky about food.”

“Very well. Please take a seat. You know, I think Aion will be delighted to see you. Even if she doesn't admit it.” He gestures towards the chairs and sofas at the part of the room opposite of him. It looks a bit like a lobby. That's right, the bar and lobby. Goodness, I'm having a hard time

remembering anything. I've been here before. I know I have been.

“Yeah? What makes you say that?” I let the softness of the couch consume me. I haven't felt anything as comfortable as this in a long time. It feels so good. I'm melting into it.

“Well don't tell her I said this but she said the first thing she thought of after waking up was you. Again, keep it secret. You know how Aion is.”

“I thought I did.” I quietly reply.

“Ah... ” We enter an awkward silence and he returns to fixing whatever it was he was making for Aion. I don't want to force anything here but I do want to learn more about what happened that day. I also want to hear more about who he is and why he's here. He did say Aion will be up soon. I'm surprised that just showing up here didn't grab her attention.

“Hey, so Hermes, I was still wondering about why you're here, working for Aion.”

“Hmm well I suppose it started out just by me simply being a messenger of the gods as well as a psychopomp. I would relay things to her on behalf of whomever requested it. Chrono for instance, would have me check up on a fledgling Aion, gauge her progress and give her work to do. My services weren't requested as much as the Age of Gods winded down. I enjoyed speaking with Aion and asked her if I could stick around here for a bit. She agreed but I usually keep to myself unless requested.”

“And the snake thing that showed up after our fight?”

“Ah, I simply thought that would be the most useful creature in the situation. If I could've gotten a good grip on you from beneath the sands, I suppose you wouldn't have spent such a long time away. I apologise for my failure.”

“It's not like we expected that to happen. It was already tense enough between Aion and I. She was, well you know, and I was exhausted.”

“All worked out in the end though huh? You look no worse for wear.” All worked out? So he

doesn't know what happened. Does that mean Aion doesn’t either?

“Yeah, it all worked out in the end.” I lie to him.

“Perhaps while we wait for Aion, you can tell me about it?” In the hall to the left of me, a door slams shut. It looks like we had less time without her than we had thought but I came here to see her anyways.

“Tell you about what, Hermes? And why did you allow Chrono in? You know I don't want to be bothered.” Every step she takes down the hall is audible, ringing in my ears. Every step fills me with anxiety. I’m here. I made it all the way here to see her.

“Oh, you'll be pleasantly surprised by our guest Aion. She's waiting for you here in the lobby.” I turn my head at Hermes horrified. No! You weren't supposed to call me out dude! Now I'm on the spot. She’s going to know it's me because nobody else can get up here and when she sees me what is she going to say? What is she going to do? Is she going to be upset? Is she going to want to fight? She's going to be mad at me for sure! I made her upset! I almost killed her! I'm...

“Watson? Back sooner than I thought. Why did it feel like Chrono showed up?” Her voice. The first time I've heard her voice in a thousand years. Chrono? Waiting for me? That's all she has to say to me? That's it? What the fuck Aion?

“That's all you have to say Aion? All this time and that's it?” I hold my voice back as much as I could, getting out of my seat and walking towards her.

“I don’t have any work for you so why are you here?” Aion replies.

“You know damn well why I'm here Aion!” She motions towards Hermes, apparently a signal to have her meal ready. Is this guy her butler? What the hell?

“Sit back down, Watson. I suppose Chrono told you how to reach me. That's good. You came back and you're not dead. Why do you look so upset?” Despicable, self centred, evil bitch.

“That's it? Not how are you? Not I missed you? Not where have you been? What is wrong with

you Aion?" Rattling plates enter from the side opposite of us. Hermes sets a tray down with an assortment of sandwiches, a tea pot and a few cups on top of saucers on to the table in front of us.

"Please, take a seat Cassandra. I'm sure we can do this civilly. Aion, you too." Hermes motions to her and to my absolute shock, she complies with the request without resistance.

"Hot or cold Cassandra? If you'd prefer cold I'll fetch some ice."

"Oh, yeah sure. I'd like it cold." I answer. Hermes smiles and turns around, where I assume he is heading back towards the bar. I shift my focus to Aion who is already helping herself to a sandwich.

"Aion, why didn't you come for me?"

"I couldn't find you. I didn't know where to look."

"I woke up in that lab. Chrono or whoever the hell he is, had possession of me. It was an icy, cold room and I was all alone. Do you have any idea how awful it was? How much I went through?"

"No." She picks up the teapot and pours herself a drink. You're such a selfish, egotistical woman!

"And you're ok with that? Like I didn't see you reach out for me? Like you didn't scream my name out, calling for me before that monster kidnapped me?"

"You turned out fine Watson, what's the big deal? Do you think I go out looking for every person who goes missing here? You haven't asked me how I am, why should I tell you anything?" I can't deal with this woman. What is wrong with her? Why can't she admit for a single second that she did something wrong? Even now, after everything she's disrespecting me. I even beat her! Is that it? Is she upset I won?

"Here Cassandra, its usually for alcohol but you can put some of these ice cubes into your cup all the same." Hermes returns, holding a small bucket with a pair of tongs inside it in my face. I've never really used something like this. I take it out of his hands, grab my ice and pour my tea. He grabs it after me and does the same. We're all silent while making our drinks and grabbing sandwiches. Aion is… Aion. She's still the same flawless looking being. Beautiful and elegant. Even

up to my “death,” I could only think about how pretty she looked. I can't say if yelling at her would get her attention. Has anything I ever said to her even mattered? If I act like her, would that get her to listen? Worth a shot I suppose, it's not like either of us want to have another fight. At least I don't want a fight, I want to know what happened. I take a swig of my ice tea, my liquid confidence builder. It's flavourful despite no milk nor sugar. I like it.

“Aion. I just want to know what happened that day after I vanished. I'm glad you've healed. I had only heard rumours from the other girls that you were, or are, using a mechanical body in addition to your real one.” Aion sets her tea cup down and lets out a sigh. She stays silent, running her right index finger around the rim of the cup. Is she going to talk? I clear my throat and look over at Hermes. He seems to be be daydreaming at the moment, not focused on anything in particular. Am I the crazy one here?

“Cass. You did deal with my spare that day. Much of my work I delegate to either the other me or Hermes. She recovered just fine, in fact she's out right now, working. I will try to clear up what I can for you.”

“Thank you, Aion. I didn't come here to fight. I'm only here to talk, to find out what happened. I'll leave you alone after this.” I reply to her and she picks up her cup, taking another sip of tea. She places her free hand on her mouth in a sort of stereotypical thinking pose. It seems to have caught Hermes attention as he returns his focus to the present.

“I thought it was Chrono that arrived but it was you. I thought this because Chrono has a distinct sort of, signature or feeling, that I can sense. You met him and he led you all the way here. Do I have that right?” She pauses and stares at me. Those blue eyes. Flawless in colour, they enamour me every single time. I slowly nod at her, hoping that it signals her to continue.

“You mentioned waking up in a lab, that's a bit of Chrono's handiwork. I could hear Hermes describing the origin of the two of us earlier. Yes, I am Chrono's successor but Chrono has a larger

sheet of time to watch over than I do. Hmm no larger isn't the right word. Chrono is time. He is every second that ticks on a clock. Time is a cycle, a self perpetuating system. If anything, I watch over him and am to safeguard him. Although he has only recently visited our timeline. Recently is relative. I'm sure you can't actually imagine the amount of time that has passed since we last met. Anyways back to the lab. Chrono is not the creator of that lab, he only assisted in its creation. He had struck a deal with its creator to get to you."

"To get to me? The creator wanted me?"

"Chrono couldn't get over to our universe without some concessions. He was severely weakened on account of his universe ending. I don't think I need to explain that part. Since time was short there he was unable to act on his own so he enlisted the help of an ancient creature. A maleficent and evil creature from the darkest reaches of the universe. Chrono knew what he was getting into and knew exactly how to entice the creature." She pauses, grabbing another sandwich slice and biting into it.

"So, what was it? An evil creature?"

"Depending on one's point of view, sure. It's called The Watcher. A cosmic horror that was working on behalf of other similar creatures from the far edges of the universe. The hands that pulled you into the darkness that day we fought was a creature of the same origin. I'm glad to see that you don't display any negative effects from the encounter." She doesn't know. Chrono hasn't told her. Maybe he hasn't had time? Or maybe he's withholding it from her…

"Right… So what did he do? How did Chrono work with this Watcher to get here?" I ask.

"He promised it The Chrononaut."

"The Chrononaut? Me, right?" She nods and takes a sip of tea. Hermes clears his throat, attempting to join the conversation.

"Did he tell you that Cassandra? Chrono that is? The Watcher itself has been long gone. It

possessed the body of the lab's creator, a man named Joseph Ghoti. He was a brilliant man, a genius with knowledge centuries ahead of the technology that was present in his era." Hermes begins to speak for Aion. She uses it as her cue to finish her lunch.

"His era? What do you mean by that?" I feel like I've missed out of something big here despite being the centre of it all.

"Dr. Joeseph Ghoti was someone akin to oh let's say, Issac Newton. His work forever changed the course of humanity. A computer genius that created the first "living" AI."

"A living AI?"

"Oh yes, much of the same that Chrono and Aion now employ. Ghoti's creation of the AI was not unnoticed by The Watcher. For whatever the reason, the timing added up for them to encounter one another. Perhaps that there was a way to now feasibly eliminate humanity with a single tap of a key on a keyboard gained the monsters its attention. In any case, the doctors system was missing something. It lacked critical decision making. He couldn't get the algorithm to make sense of things in those types of situations. He could have it do everything up to the decision itself. Maybe it lacked a soul, we never found out."

"Never looked either." Aion chimes in with a third sandwich in her hand.

"And on top of that, the doctor was only human. He only had so much time to perfect his creation. He needed time more than anything else. This is where Chrono had cut a deal with The Watcher. The Watcher wanted the doctor to finish his work and Chrono was aware of your existence, having apparently seen a version of you show up with Time Goddess of their universe." A version of me? An alternate Cassandra? And she still works with the Time Goddess? Maybe we're just *made* for each other… But wouldn't that be Aion? Why didn't he say her name?

"Chrono told The Watcher that he could get into contact with The Chrononaut. You."

"And I spent the last thousand years as their guinea pig?" I ask.

“A thousand years? Hmm, that's odd, it only took about 350 years to finalise the technology. Whatever they learned, it gave the AI the ability to make decisions. No more need for human intervention.”

“So what happened to wiping out humanity or whatever it was?”

“Chrono killed The Watcher and well more or less, stole the doctors work. Something like that was too dangerous to be unleashed upon human society. A machine that can decide the fate of its master is too powerful. However, it fits as the perfect vessel for us Gods. I suppose its sort of like uploading their personality and consciousness into the machine. A veritable Ship of Theseus if you will.” Feel like I've heard that one somewhere before…

“But then how did I fight the Aion here before any of that happened?” I ask, extremely confused. Aion finishes chewing and holds her hand up to Hermes.

“It's the end of time here Cassandra. Anything goes. Nothing goes.” She takes the role of story teller away from Hermes and he finally gets a chance to eat.

“Right. Ok. So if all that happened in less than 400 years, why was I asleep for a thousand?”

“I can only assume Chrono was keeping watch over you. He must've kept it very secret. I don't think any of us knew you were in that lab, Cassandra.”

“So, Chrono used me as a bargaining chip to get to this universe. What was he doing in that other universe?”

“That's a question for either him or Morrigan. I don't know the exact details but if I were to fathom a guess, he was probably there to see if he could prevent the timeline from failing. Again, since time there was ending he wasn't very powerful.”

“Morrigan? Why her?”

“Morrigan travelled with him. In fact a few people did. That Daphne girl was with them too. I suppose Althea was searching far and wide for you.”

“Daph was there? It must have been a crazy spell that got her over.”

“Indeed. One a bit too powerful if you ask me.” Aion angles her cup towards Hermes, prompting him to get up and pour more for her.

“Where is she now? What happened?” I ask.

“If you came from the lab then I'm certain you saw the portal to Atlantis.” She replies.

“Oh, right yeah, I saw it.”

“Althea, Chrono and Daphne coordinated its creation. They wanted a quick link to you in the event you returned. You haven't used it however, I never felt your presence back on Earth.”

“No, I haven't really had time to do so yet. I don't know when exactly I woke up but I've made my way all the way here from the lab. I spent a few days resting in a room Chrono gave me at the castle and now I'm here. You should know that, you mentioned Morrigan.”

“Ah, slip of the tongue.” She sticks her tongue out at me. I can her a laugh underneath Hermes breath. This woman. She's been putting up a front the whole time! She knew I was here! She's been waiting for me!

“Well again, you look no worse for wear so, I guess it all worked out in the end right?” She smiles at me. After all that, she simply smiles at me. We continue to chat over tea. Small things here and there. Hermes runs back and forth the bar and the table with sandwiches for us all to enjoy. Everything that's happened up to this point makes one thing clear to me. This woman is still Aion.

Quiet Romance/6

“Any other questions, Watson?” She gestures to Hermes again. The luncheon tray is empty and all the tea has been finished. He takes it away and begins cleaning it at the bar. This is the most normal thing I've done since waking up. It was almost sorta kinda nice. I needed a minute to absorb it all.

“I don't think I have any left right now. Thank you, Aion.” I smile at her, somehow prompting her to stand up.

“Hermes, would you give us some space? I want to be alone with Cassandra.” I can hear the tray being set down onto the counter and footsteps travelling away from of us.

“No problem. I'll head on down and see what's going on with everyone else.” A door shuts. Silence permeates the room. I swear I can hear something else to my left though. I'm not sure what it was. It's sort of like a scratching noise. Like the noise wood makes on a boat in the ocean. Or strings of metal being pulled and stretched over something. What’s that sound? Aion wasn't doing anything. Nobody else is here. It’s just us. Just us. Aion. She’s finally here. Aion! Aion. Aion…

“Cass. I'm glad you're alright. Truly I am” She's walking towards me. Is she… Is she being sincere? What's going on? My face feels hot. I feel hot. Aion gestures for me to get up. I comply, standing up out of the cushioned seat. My heart is pounding. I feel nervous and anxious and giddy and happy and I'm sure if I had a tail it would be wagging at the speed of light. I was a puppy who waited for a thousand years to see the house door open up to this person again.

“I'm glad you decided to visit. I was so worried about you. Nobody had any idea where you had vanished to. If only I had known Chrono was directly watching over you, I would've pulled you out of their much sooner.” She pauses, heavy silence crashes into me. That can’t be all Aion!

“This delight comes from my whole being, for you.” Her hand cups my right cheek. It’s getting hot. I… What do I do? Aion’s touching me again! I rest my face in her palm. In her palm… I haven’t changed a bit. Around her the world melts away. I’m already a puddle of pleasure.

She grabs my chin and pulls my face into hers. I shut my eyes, pulling my head back. Not out of fear. No, this time I shut them because I know exactly what she’s doing. She always does this to keep me from talking. And I always let her.

Her lips press into mine, my jaw firmly in her grip. I’m hers and she’s making sure I remember that. I can’t help but let her do it. I’m back. She’s back. We’re back. She’s taking my breath away and I let her because deep down inside, I still love her. I can feel the warmth of her mouth, the warmth of her hand on me, the warmth of the person that I love.

My arms travel around her, I want to hold her. I want her to hold me back. I want her to hold all of me. Everything feels better now. I'm better now. I'm with her. That's all I need. All I want.

Aion presses her body into mine, enchanting me. I’m forced to take a step back to keep my balance and this breaks our kiss. The only breath I have left are heavy ones. I open my eyes back up to her pursed lips, objects of my desire. They form into a smile and she pushes me down into the couch. I slowly sink back into the cushion as her blue eyes open up and stare down at me. The beautiful, radiant sapphire eyes excite me as I stare into them. I'm sure my heart would be bursting out of my chest right about now if it could. Aion put herself down on her knees, a view I have rarely, if ever actually seen. She’s so gorgeous, my body trembles before her. I grab my knees with my hands, hoping to calm the shaking down.

“You showered today right?” An exaggerated half sigh half laugh fires itself out of my mouth. I can't believe what I just heard.

“Of course I showered silly. I shower everyday.” I answer her.

“Well, not every day.” She chimes in.

“Ugh, shut up.” We laugh together.

“Then a thousand kisses for your return. Every part of you deserving of one for your patience.” Aion says.

We smile at each other and laugh at our dumb little conversation. I'm only a little bit offended she asked me that but I guess that's how we were back then. It wasn't fighting and arguing. It was telling jokes, flirting, teasing, playing games, surprising each other, singing for each other, drawing for each other, being there for one another. Aion's hands slither over mine and try as I might, I can't swallow my saliva without feeling extremely shy. Her fingers snuggle into mine, holding them together. I feel all the love in my heart for this woman surge through my whole body. I'm happy that I'm here with her now. I'm happy that I've returned and that she didn't hate me.

Her grip recedes from my hands. She takes them and sets them on the sides of my thighs. Her nails crawl up my thighs and I can't help but squish them together at the sensation. I can hear her quietly giggle but I couldn't help it. The butterflies in my stomach are going wild. Even if we've done this before, it's always special with her. It's always special with the person you love. The familiar sensation of her nails pressing into me sends sparks of excitement throughout my body. They slide up to the side of my skirt, gripping it in hand. She pulls it down, the sound counting down to the moment that we will reunite our bodies. I know what's coming, what she wants to do to me, and how she's going to do it. I can’t stop thinking about it. About her. This is what it was all for.

How exciting the feeling is, to lift my bottom up for her. To feel her pull my skirt down. To re-experience the embarrassment of her staring at my panties. Aion stares up at me and smirks. This woman is so beautiful, every time I see her I fall in love again. The last few times I saw her I could only think of her beauty and now she's moments away from ripping my underwear off and eating me out. Maybe she’s enchanted me and I can only see her with hearts in my eyes. I'm completely smitten.

Aion slips her fingers underneath my panties, pulling them to the side and, to much embarrassment, leaving me wide open for any method of attack. She rubs the tip of my pussy, I reflexively arc my back. Her touch is delightful. Her head lowers into my lap. I know what was coming next, and I hope that I won't be far behind. Wet kisses begin to travel up and down my thighs. Her breath feels heavenly on my skin. Although, my body wants more. It wants more and fast. I place my hand on her head and rub her. That's right, this pet of mine here is a Goddess. In a literal sense at that. Aion's hair is a little longer than before now that I stare down at her. This pretty face is deep in my crotch, worshipping my body with kisses.

I push her head out of my thighs. She looks back at me with a tilted head, maybe a little confused as to why I stopped her. I let my back slip down the seat, spreading my legs wide open. I don't think I need to instruct her, she's a good girl. A silent laugh exits her mouth, she returns to service me. She yanks on my panties, I lift my butt up again and she rips them off at the speed of light. She grabs my thighs, constricting me in place. Aion's lips press against mine. I feel so embarrassed, I can't even imagine why I'm thinking of this but I haven't shaved in such a long time. What am I thinking? If it bothered her she wouldn't be down there right now giving me a tongue bath. Her tongue is gliding over my pussy like it's skating on ice. The sticky fluids from my body and her mouth mix together like some silly custom brand of lubricant that only serves to make us even more horny.

Aion stops her tongue work to slide a finger in me. I feel so vulnerable but even now, I still trust her enough to do things like this to me. She puts her mouth onto the upper tip of my vagina and slowly swirls her tongue around in circles over my clit. I have to put my hands on her head to keep myself stable. I feel so good. We haven't missed a beat. Even after a thousand years. I wrap my thighs around her head and let her get her fill. Between my moans and her gasps for breaths, I could feel the build up inside me begin to peak. She wants me to feel this way. I want to feel this way too. I feel my lower half start to tense up. My muscles are tightening up and my heart is beating faster.

I'm so flustered. She's making me melt into the chair and I don't want it to stop. I want her to go until I explode and make a mess all over her pretty face.

I let my head fall back and tighten my thighs around Aion's head. I hope you're enjoying this Aion. A thousand years of frustration. I need this, keep up the work baby. I also hope nobody is within earshot of us. I'm not able to stop my cries of pleasure from echoing out. Hermes seems to listen to Aion well enough and nobody else can get up here. It's her and I. It's us. Finally being back together is making my heart beat more intensely. I feel like I'm going to have a heart attack. It's so exciting. It's so fulfilling. It feels so good. I love her so much. Her finger sliding in and out of me feels so good. Her lips purse around my little love bean. The relentless sucking is going to finish me off.

"Aion, if you keep it up I'm going to cum." I'm met with no response. She didn't hear stop so she's not going to stop. Not that she would've stopped anyways. She wants this too. She wants to hear me scream in ecstasy. She wants to know she made me cum. She wants me to know that she made my body behave honestly in front of her. In fact, she's smiling. I can feel her smile. I'm squirming in the palm of her hand. If anything, I've only encouraged her. She pulls her finger out of me and adjusts herself. She uses both hands to pull me into her with my lower back raised into her face. I keep my thighs wrapped around her as best I can. She holds me on both sides of my tummy like she's eating a sandwich. A giant Cass sandwich that's about to leave it's secret sauce all over her face- I can't take it anymore! It's Aion! I love her! Aion!

"A-Aion! I'm cumming!" My body convulses in pleasure. She grips me even tighter, it makes me so sexy. My body is an electric current and she's taming me, making me hers. I have only recently come to terms with this feeling. Sometimes, being controlled isn't so bad.

My legs shake, I can't stop them. It helps to keep wrapped around Aion's head. My love juices all too eager, escape my body. I don't know how long it was but I could hear Aion continue sucking as

my body slowly calmed down. The slurping noises were definitely telling her she did a good job. She eventually sets me down and lets my body start recovering.

“W-Wow.” I exclaim. I don't really believe that just happened but well, we did it. No point in trying to act like I didn't enjoy it or want it.

“Wow indeed. Cassandra, I hope I didn't go to far or anything.” I immediately put my hands up and waved her concern off.

“Oh no, not at all. It's been a long time. I knew we still had feelings for each other. Even after everything.” Aion nods at me and stands up. She grabs my skirt and panties, setting them on the table.

“Hey Cass, do you remember that time we went to Manila?” She asks.

“Manila? I remember two things about Manila. That phantom train incident we solved and the insane level of humidity that made me feel gross just being outside. I could feel my sweat crawling down my back even at night…” I answer.

“Yeah… So remember what we did the night we solved the incident?” She further inquires.

“We ate a ton of food and drank a lot.” I answer again.

“And in our room?”

“We… oh right. You debuted that, what was it, that magical...”

“Penis.” She confidently replies.

“Right. Ahem, yes, that was definitely a night.” I remember when she did it. She lifts up her clothing, revealing a similar looking “enhancement,” on her lower body. Oh my… I had forgotten more than I thought. This thing is so thick! Will it go in? And she’s so nonchalant about it! Aion, you’re such a goof when it comes to these things. I missed it.

“So...” She says.

“So...” I say back.

“Round two?”

“Oh please Aion, you don't need my permission. Just fuck me.”

“So crude. I'll comply I suppose.”

“Don't act so high and mighty about it dear. I certainly hope you've gotten better at moving those hips!”

“Oh you little!” She grabs my sides and pushes me down, deeper into the cushion. I guess that was enough to light the fire in her. Always so competitive. It's cute. I'm admittedly still horny. I don't feel like I've had my fill and Aion didn't get to feel good at all. I can remedy that. My body is more than welcoming right now. She tasted the hors d'oeuvre so why not give her the main course?

I spread my lower lips for her with my left hand and it must've caused quite the commotion in her head. She rubs my wet hole, getting messy with my personal lubricant. She pushes herself onto me and that just gets me all fired up inside. It’s so sexy. I didn't think I'd be ready right after cumming but I'm so down for this round two I can't contain it. I'm sure I'm a pouring mess down there right now, my shame on full display. But I don't care. It's Aion. She'll take care of me. She loves me, I love her. She looks into my eyes and I stare into hers. I wink at her and blow a little kiss. She smiles at the gesture and puts her body into position. She still has her top on. I think it might be sexier with it still up.

“Ready?” She's breathing so heavily. It's like she just ran a country mile. My goodness, I haven't seen this side of this woman in so long! It makes me feel so special.

“Ready.” I give her my word with a smile. My seal of approval to have my belly button tickled from the inside. As much as I wanted to tease her, I want to make love so much more. Her slight prodding on me gets me ready to start taking this thing. This thing got even fatter… Aion why is your penis so big? But if I'm responsible for making it like that then I suppose it's only fair to take care of it until its soft again. Her grip around me tightens, I stare down my body in eager

anticipation as she slowly inserts herself inside me.

Oof, I feel like I'm sort of being stabbed. I let out deep, heavy breaths. It has been a long time since we did this, since we've had sex this way. I feel a little worried that I'll break. I have to clench down on her and steel my muscles. My body is a little stiff despite loosening up with all the foreplay. It sort of hurts if I'm being honest. The girth on this thing is way too much for my delicate flower.

I can feel her push further in. Her hips press into me, I squeeze the cushion below me with my hands. It's not the best feeling right now but damn it I want her to enjoy. Her head droops down over my chest and I look up at her. Her hair is hiding her face from me but I really want to see what expression she's making. She remains still, her body one with mine.

“Aion?” Her hair flips up with her head like a wild animal. She moves in towards me, her face close to mine. I can feel the heat emanating off of her and she’s coming down for a kiss! I have to kiss back. It connects us even more and it's everything I want from Aion. Her attention. Her love. Her body. It's all here in my possession and in turn it makes me her possession. I'm her pleasure toy. Her sex toy. Goodness, what am I thinking? All that doom and gloom has evaporated from my soul. I just needed to know that she still loves me!

“Cass, you're clenching down really hard. It’s making it tough to move in you.”

“Oh sorry. It's been awhile and well you know we never really have sex like this. My body is doing it on it's own. I can relax for you.”

“No, it's totally ok. I just feel like it's going to make me cum easily if you strangle me down there with your body.” That was a neurone activator for sure. If I make her cum quickly then she'll want the feeling more. She'll want to come back for more and we'll be together more.

“Give me your hands Aion. Do me like you did before.” Aion hesitantly nods her head.

She lets her grip relax off of my body and she grabs my hands with hers. Oh, now it is

scandalous. We are holding hands, staring into each others eyes as we fuck. I literally have her in my hands now. I'm so infatuated with this woman I don't care about anything else. Her eyes, her mouth, her face, her nose, her hair, her hands, her body, her soul. I want every single part of her to myself. The aching in my heart has faded. The loneliness and fear have dissipated.

She strokes herself with my body, pulling and pushing her hips back and forth. Her moans begrudgingly leave her mouth. She was trying to keep them quiet. That's so cute. I like hearing her though, I like knowing that she feels good and seeing her feel good makes me feel good in return. It keeps me focused on her pleasure. The view of her doing it keeps the fire in my chest ignited. Her cock entering and exiting me. My body is slowly getting used to the feeling. It feels like I'm almost *more* into seeing her pleasured than being pleasured myself. Not to say I'm not enjoying it but this time, I'm getting off just as much by knowing she's using me to feel good.

She wants me. She desires me. Aion turns her head down and focuses on pushing her body in and out of me.

“Hey, what are you looking away for?” I ask.

“I need to focus Cass, I'm so close.” She replies.

“Nuh uh. You look me in the eyes when you fuck me. When you cum inside me.” She pauses and her head turns back up. She pulls my right hand up and kisses it. Slowly, kisses travel further up my arm. She stares at me as she does so.

“Wh-what's all this about Aion?” I could feel my face getting hot again. Even if we were both half naked, having sex on her lounge chair I feel shy. What mystical power was laced in that kiss?

“Just to be clear, it was a draw. You didn't beat me because you were also on the verge of fainting.” So proud, of course she can't admit being losing. She wouldn't be Aion if she did. She kisses my hand again and I further melt back into the seat. Aion lets go of my hand and places it on my chest. She grabs handfuls of my boobs, it was a little surprising to feel. They hurt a bit when

pressed down on but it's so sexy. She should use *all of me* because I belong to her. Her hand tears through the buttons, my bra out on full display. She lifts my bra up and exposes my bare chest. Although having my bra sit awkwardly like that was annoying, I pull it up and over my head to get it out of our way. Aion stares down at me, raising an eyebrow with a devilish smirk. Her head lowers down again but this time to put her face between my tits. It's a little silly but I don't mind her getting a little extra sugar.

Her thrusts are getting stronger, I can feel myself being pushed harder into the backside of the cushion. Her head lifts up for a moment and she dives back down. Her lips meet the tip of my nipple and she starts sucking on it. I let out a yelp in pleasure and excitement. I place my hands around her neck.

"Good girl." I whisper to her. Her beautiful blue eyes look up and stare at me. We share a moment in time together, a couple of lesbians addicted to each other. I quickly let out a gasp as the eye contact seems to have meant she's about to do something more to me! Her teeth gently bite into my nipple. It catches me off guard. I let up off of her and gently push my hand into her like I was reprimanding her for doing that. Not that it deterred her. She continued to playfully nibble on my nipple, switching it up with sucking when she wants.

The wet sounds of our skin slapping into each other grows with her thrusts. I'm reaching my limit again. Her voice, her warmth, her body, her smile, her sweat, her smell. I'm absolutely, positively, obsessed with this woman and I can't hold it back. I can feel her move faster, push harder. She must have trouble holding it back too. I don't think there's any sense in denying her the pleasure, I wanna feel her cum inside me. I wanna feel it. I need to feel it. She lifts her head, panting.

"Cass, I'm getting close."

"Give it to me, Aion. Give me everything." She nods at me and moves in towards me. We share another kiss. Her hands travel up my body and down my arms. She takes my hands and pumps into

me even harder. She's really getting into it. I can feel her starting to tremble. Her body is shaking under the pleasure. I give her all the face she can suck. We're both breathing heavily in between kisses. She pulls my hands up with hers to the top of the seat, pinning her body into mine. I spread my legs wider and let her go wild with it. I have an unscratchable itch on the inside that only she can reach.

Every slap of skin between us is a single thrust closer to my rewards. She's pressing down so hard on me. My muffled moans match the muffled moans she lets out in-between our kiss. I can't think about anything other than her cumming inside me. I'm ready. I want it. She's going to fill me up and I want every bit of it inside me. Her grip around my hand tightens. The weight of her body is pressing down into me. Throbbing. She presses deeply into me and stops. I can feel her spill into me. Trembling. She pulls back and thrusts in a second time. My senses are being overloaded by the connection between our bodies. Pulsating. With every pump of her batter inside me she presses her weight down on me too. I'm squealing in our kiss. Erupting. I don't wanna let go. I don't want to lose her again. I love you so much Aion. She pulls out of me and stumbles onto the seating behind her. We're both exhausted, heaving our breaths. That was amazing. If only we could feel this *real* forever…

"Cass, you go wash up first. If he asks, tell Chrono everything went fine. I'm going to just rest for a moment." She puts her head down on the back of the chair and sits frozen. I should gather myself and get re-situated but that wouldn't be as fun. I swing onto the floor on all fours. She can't see me so one final surprise will top off this reunion. I crawl over to her legs and kiss them on the way up to her cock.

"C-Cass hey! You don't have to..." I don't have to but I want to. I put her shrunken, flaccid meat stick into my mouth. Let me clean it up for you Aion. I twirl my tongue over and under her. I stare up at her. I can feel her tense up again, it might be bad if she wants to do it again though. We're not

ever going to get anything done. We're just going to relish in the pleasures of flesh for eternity. I pull my head back, my lips tightly screwed around her cock. A satisfying popping noise leaves my mouth and Aion moans. Ah, how euphoric. That’s the voice I like hearing.

Honesty exiting her body.

Singing Up in Rain/7

All's well that ends well. I believe that's the saying.

I appreciate you staying quiet during the entirety of that. You are are correct though. We're back. So back. Everything is fine now. Aion is here. I'm here. We're fine.

No grudge holding? No revenge plot? Nothing?

Revenge? For what? She could've killed me at any given moment for the entirety of my life. She never did it. She puts up her bad girl act but I know her true feelings.

There's no fun in that. Give me five minutes, I'll give her something to holler about.

C'mon, I thought we were starting to have a good thing going. There's no need to fight. No reason to pretend like you need to sow chaos and disorder. Am I embarrassed you're basically watching her through my eyes like that? Sure, but it's not the end of the world.

Love is a very typical avenue of manipulation. Are you sure you don't want to try anything. A trick or two perhaps?

I know you've seen my memories. Lived them. Hell, you have memories in my body that I don't have. But I'm not the bright eyed, happy go lucky girl that just found her time travelling watch. I've learned a lot in my time, all the way up to that final fight with Aion. Chrono and Morrigan said it too. I'm the one that conquered Aion. If nothing else, I stopped her. I did my part in the universe.

That was a very long way to say no.

No, I don't want to trick her. I want to move on to greener pastures. Maybe return to the semblance of normalcy I used to live in, back in those oh so halcyon days.

What's the first step?

Well Chrono said this was my first task which was a coy way of saying more is coming. If I get

whatever he wants out of the way I can go back to see all of my friends. I can spend more time with Aion.

They wouldn't do it together though would they? Your friends and Aion that is.

Ehehe… I'm sure I can eventually… bring them around.

Not is all simple as it sounds in your head.

Especially with two voices in it now.

Well what can I say. You're just so charming and amazing Cassandra I just can't let you go back out into the world. Oh woe is me! Goodness if only you had died in that dream instead of me! Yet here I am. A slave to a mortal creature that has the ability to not only charm those around her but even Gods themselves.

Such a drama queen. Just relax. Everything is fine. You told your story to everyone. You take naps when you want. You don't have a single care in the world. Am I wrong?

I have many cares. I have many years to take care of my many cares. I, however, at the moment do not possess any cares. If I were a current care holder then I would perhaps try to thieve you of your body once more but since I am a care-less person right now I am content. I will watch this part of your life and keep it in mind when I am able to return to this world and deliver its inhabitants to my masters.

So, that was a really long way of just saying no, right?

Shut up!

I think it's time to head back down and talk to Chrono. I'm interested in the logistics of how the top part is in it's own sort of era of time. Although maybe that's more a question for Aion.

I don't think it matters that much. Both of them are gods, I'm sure they have special rules and exceptions. Besides the portal in Mare Desiderii already takes you to the end of time.

Oh, right. The hidden sea on the moon that takes you to the end of time. How ridiculously

complex.

We don't make the rules.

I imagine the bottom floor of the castle. The grand hall, the grand library, the grand staircase, the grand everything really. Ok, I assume it works just the same so here we go Cass. Three, two, one, I snap my fingers and immediately greet the warmth of the hearth in the back of the main hall. I made it. No problem. Easiest thing I've done in my life.

“Right on time Cassandra. You've got a good habit of that.” His smooth, cool sounding voice slithers into my ears. Chrono. I'm right on time? What about him? Was he just waiting for me or did I really just catch him walking through the hall?

“As I always am and will ever be Chrono. So what's up?” I ask him.

“How was your time with Aion? She wasn't too upset was she?” Oh goodness if only I could tell you.

“It was fine. We had a chat, caught up, ate a little and had some tea thanks to Hermes. By the way, where is he?”

“Hermes? I believe he stepped out, running an errand for Aion I assume. He didn't tell you?” He shoots a question back at me.

“No, Aion kinda just waved him out and he left. Thinking back on it, he's awfully obedient under Aion.” I reply.

“Ah yeah well, Aion keeps him busy. Not many Gods stuck around for the Age of Man, so to speak.”

“He doesn't want to hang out in the garden west of it all?”

“Ahaha, I suppose not. Not yet at least. Anyways now that you're free, I want to go over some work I'd like you to do for me.”

“So now I work for you huh?”

“Well, you’re the only one aware about the situation. It's about Aion.”

“Aion and reversing her total life extinction plan?”

“Correct. Aion has all the details. Well, of course she does it's her job to watch the timelines but I'd like you to accompany her.”

“You don't trust her enough to do it on her own?”

“I'd like you to see the process. See the way things work at the archive. It's unfortunately not found here. I'm in the process of moving it over to the castle. Have everything in one handy location. But that's still a ways off so you'll still have to travel out to it.”

“Where do we go?” I ask.

“Return to the Witch's House. The house is technically in the bottom of the reverse castle. The rest of the castle we call Leng. A compartmentalised version of a universe that used to exist here at the end of time. It contains the archive as well as a few other logistical sort of areas.”

“The castle didn't look that big. In fact, this castle looks twice as large.”

“It's bigger on the inside. These areas are really for people who like to mess with time and space. Namely Aion.”

“Alright so we go to the archive and fix things there?”

“Yes. Aion will guide you through it, whether she likes it or not.”

“When do we go?”

“Soon. Before I have you do that I think you need a bit of, levelling up, so to speak.”

“Levelling up? Like getting stronger? Why would I need to do that?”

“There may be a chance, that you two will run into, a less than savoury foe.” A what? Why do I need to deal with that? This sounds like he's pushing the job off onto us. I get Aion messed up but c'mon. I don't want to fight either. I just got some semblance of normalcy back in my life.

“Do I have to?” I reply to him.

“Yes, you have to. You must see your work through to the end. I'm going to teach you to be a better, stronger and most importantly, smarter Cassandra Watson.” *He's gotta be messing with you gyahahaha.*

“What does that mean exactly?”

“You've gotten better at weaving yourself into the flow of time but I'm going to teach you to control the flow itself. Just like me. Just like Aion.”

“Control the flow? Like you guys?” Chrono nods his head at me and smiles. That's huge Massive! I'd basically be a god like them!

That would be impressive. If he's telling the truth.

What do you mean if? Why would he lie?

Hasn't he been lying to you the entire time you've been here? He's lied to you more than Aion.

Look he wasn't lying, he just, you know… wasn’t telling the whole story. He's withholding information.

If he's going to tell you to do something you should get the full story. Lest you end up possessed by some monster who will spend a millennia trying to take your body.

“I have some ground rules I'd like to set, Chrono.”

“Oh? Go ahead and name them. I'm sure we can sort this all out.” He replies.

“I don't want to be left in the dark about anything we do. I want to know what might be waiting there for us. I want to know why you haven't told me everything about why I'm here. I want to know about that lab. I want to know about anything that might have something to do with me.”

“That's a lot. Let me try to answer it quickly and easily for you. Do you mind if we walk and talk? There's a room I'd like to take you here that will help us get you physically up to speed.”

“A room can do that?”

“It's a state of mind kind of thing Cassandra. I'll have you doing all but leading the Myrmidons.”

“Please tell me I'm not going off to fight Paris...”

“Oh no, I wouldn’t send you off to fight your own brother! Plus, you’ll have Aion going with you. It's to equalise the field, in the event you run into *them*.” I’ll have Aion… Is she my Achilles then? Chrono begins walking towards the staircase. I follow shortly behind him to this mystery room. Them?

“So what is *them*? Who is *them*? Tell me more Chrono.”

“To accurately tell you I need to know what Aion told you. No doubt what she said has had an impact on your decision making.”

“Aion told me about the purpose of the lab, the AI, it's creator and how you got here from the other universe.”

“Well then she has covered all the bases. What exactly do you need to know regarding this?”

“I need to know who you worked with to get that lab operational and why I was used as bait to make it happen.” He laughs and stops over a few steps ahead of me on the staircase.

“That is tricky because the person I made the deal with no longer exists. The person who made the lab also no longer exists. What else did you learn?” He asks me.

“The AI needed decision making criteria or something. Apparently my life was hectic enough to fit its perimeters. I assume that's because of the choices I made up to facing off with Aion.” I answer him.

“Indeed. It was a perfect set of high stress, high tension and high intensity situations that held invaluable data for us.”

“And it worked right? That's what the metal brain in the lab is right? What does the AI even do? Why did you end up taking it and using it despite it being a human creation?”

“It's too early for humans to have access to it. It's creator was far ahead of others in his field. In some strange sequence of events, the doctor met a being called The Watcher. This is the same one I

would strike a deal with later. The Watcher considered AI an accelerationist creation. This device would wreak havoc among humanity, largely for being able to seamlessly replace humans. The Watcher is an Agent of Chaos and not even the only one we ended up striking a deal with. I'm sure you are rather familiar with another." *Cheers!*

"Ok so you met this monster and thought that it would be a great opportunity to work together? That's crazy." I reply.

"Crazy to a human, not to a God. I'm aware of what their affiliation was but, I needed to use them both. Both The Watcher and Nyarlathotep were careful though. Both of the creature's insurance policies guaranteed a host body to use in case things went south. You were to be Nyarlathotep's. Of course you miraculously over came that."

"Not without issue!" *Not without issue for yourself or for I? I do feel like I've been on the negative side of this bargain.*

There is no bargain between us because I was of a party that could not consent in my condition nor do I have a representative that could do so on my behalf!

"So who gave up the other body? If I'm Nyarlathotep's, who did The Watcher take?" Chrono clears his throat and turns away from me.

"The universe I visited was out of necessity. The timeline was going to end because of Aion's plan but it was unique compared to most. If you recall Aion's lesson to you, the two of you switch places over time. Aion becomes Cass and Cass becomes Aion, if you will."

"Right, I remember her talking about that. What of it?"

"This was a universe with a different case. I have no presence there. Not an official one at least. That went to a different party, Aion took the role later."

"Alright, go on."

"You were missing however. I went to search for that version of you there but I couldn't find

her.”

“What happened? What did you find?” Chrono returns to his walk up the staircase.

“I found a dying world with a broken cast of characters barely holding on. Even I struggled there.”

“And you met this Watcher character to take you back to this universe?”

“Something like that.”

“So who did The Watcher take?” I ask.

“Morrigan is originally from that universe. Well no, that's not entirely right. Morrigan had already died by the time I arrived. The Morrigan here is her younger sister, Lilith.”

“Lilith? But Morrigan's sister's names here are Macha and Badb. Why are they different?”

“Couldn't say. That's a question for Morrigan.”

“So Morrigan is from that universe and she's not The Watcher right?”

“Correct. Morrigan is one of the people who travelled with me. A few others too but the most relevant one is Aion.” *Ah, that's who they took then. I wonder why they took that Aion though. There were several other more qualified bodies to inhabit.*

What do you mean by that? Why does it sound like taking Aion, that Aion, is a bad thing?

I've only heard about how she was but, that Aion was already good as dead. She was hanging on by a thread at the end.

“Here Cassandra, this is the room we'll use.” I didn’t notice we made it all the way to our destination. He opens the door for me and I walk inside. It’s just a plain looking room, nothing special about it. No furniture, no lighting, or at least no lighting that I could see. The only light is what pours in from the staircase. I can see three things on the floor. I hope I'm imagining what they are because it looks like there’s a ball, a knife and a gun. The door shuts behind me and the light vanishes with it. I can hear Chrono stepping in front of me.

“Cass, stand on the opposite end of the room for me.” I take a few steps forward with my hands pushed behind me. I'll hit the wall with them and be opposite of him. I don't get what this has to do with managing time.

“I’m going to hit you with this ball until you learn to dodge it. The same goes for the other two items on the ground. When you dodge the ball we’ll move onto the knife. When you learn to dodge that we’ll move onto the gun.”

“Whoa wait! You're gonna what?!” The loud thunking noise of the ball travels through the room as it bounces off of my head. Damn that hurt!

“How does a time traveller get hit by anything? Stop the ball from hitting you Cass.” He says. The ball instantly smashes into my head again! God damn that hurts! It hits again and again. There's no delay in time between throws. This is so messed up he's just reversing time! That’s cheating!

“Ok! Ok! Chrono wait! Just give me a sec to get my bearings!” I shout at him in frustration. Damn this is so dumb how do I stop this?

Stop time in his time manipulation. That’s what you did to Aion when you fought.

Did I?

Yes, she froze time and moved in to kill you and you counter froze it to run away.

Then it's just a matter of doing it again. I've done it before. I can do it. I just need to feel it out a bit.

Another ball comes crashing into my face, it got my nose pretty well. Fuck that hurts! Why is he so good at throwing that ball? Stay calm Cass. Feel it out. Take a deep breath and FUCK! He's starting to piss me off with these hits! This is annoying as all hell! I'll get better at controlling the flow just you wait Chrono!

Feelings/8

He's lifting his arm back up, winding the throw. He's pushing forwards. His hand is beginning to let go of the ball. The ball is just about to leave and STOP! The sound of my skin making contact with the ball happens again. I was quarter of a tenth of a second off come on. Why is this guy pitching for 200 kilometres a second so casually? He's winding up again. It's coming. Stop time a little quicker and you catch the ball! He's standing right there like an idiot in the dark. Well so are you but c'mon! He's throwing. Stop, stop, stop, stop.

Another ball makes contact with my face. God how long has it been since we entered?

All I've done is get a small count on his movement but it's not enough.

Just stop time Cass, damn! You just need to stop time after he throws it!

I can't stop quick enough!

There is no quick enough! He wants you to understand you control the flow! You control the flow not him!

But I can't...

Can't what? Don't think about the wind up or his hands or anything. Just stop time. Take the flow from him. You are waiting for it to happen.

I'm waiting for it to happen? As opposed to what?

As opposed to making it happen you dumb bitch!

Making it happen? Like make him throw the ball under my control. I see now. How the hell did you come up with that?

How do YOU have such a close minded thought process when it comes to time despite being a time traveller? You know whats going to happen, just avoid it!

I know what's going to happen… So I get out of the way before it happens…

Yes! Bloody hell Cass. Where is the creative girl that got away from Aion?

Shut up! And thanks… Ok. Just stop the ball. Make him miss. I don't need to dodge it I need to make him miss. It makes sense in my head. This can work… OW! Yeah, ok, I'm sick of this damn ball! Throw it again and I'm gonna throw this damn thing back at you! With the snap of my fingers I freeze time. Five, four, three, two, one, he's really frozen. I can't believe it! So I need to get time to move on its own. I have to push it forward but how do I force time forward? This time my question is met with silence.

Hey, no ideas now? What happened?

What? Me? I don't know how to control time that's all you.

Oh my god! What kind of lazy, inconsiderate brain worm are you?

"Too long Cass." The sound of Chrono's voice and following it going to be… Another ball smashes my already smashed face. What a pain.

"That was a good idea, really. I assume you froze time and wanted to then push it forward?"

"Right?"

"Right… didn't work out that way though."

"Your only experience going forward is either with Aion's help or that leap to the end of time to run away from Aion. Right?" He asks.

"Yeah." I reply.

"Hmm, that gives me an idea. Although I'm not exactly sure how the process would work on you as you currently are." His suggestion sparks some of my curiosity.

"As I currently am? A little less cryptic please."

"Just running through something in my head. I'll let you know about it after you recover

"Recover?" I ask.

“You won't be healing all of that over night on your own you know. The medical pods in the lab will fix you up better than new.”

“Oh, the medical pod. Well I have reservations about going back into one you see. The last time I was in one I stayed inside for a thousand years.” *We could have a little one on one time. For old time's sake.*

Absolutely not.

“I see. Right, that's on me. Sorry. It's just to heal you up, I promise Cass. It'll just be like sleeping in bed. You go in for eight hours and come back out, nothing more.”

“Nothing more?”

“You have my word. Nothing more.”

“Well, not like I want to sleep with all these bruises anyways. Let's head over then. I'll go grab my coat and meet you downstairs.”

“Ah, no need to do that. There's a portal to and from the lab. A temporary method that connects the two until we connect the castles.”

“You had a transportation method the whole time?” I ask him.

“Yeah. Why?” He replies.

“No particular reason. Good to know there is one is all.” Bitter feelings from my solo trip arise. I shouldn't be upset about this. I just didn't know. Of course the other Chrono wouldn't have told me. It's fine.

“Lead the way then, Chrono.” I extend my arm out for him.

“I will actually meet you down by the base of the staircase in a moment, I need to let the others know I'll be out.”

“Gotta check in with your mom or something?”

“Ahaha well I suppose it's something like that. Perhaps you can check in with Aion, let your

girlfriend know you won't be able to stop by tonight!" Before I can get back at him, he's already vanished. The door to the hallway is now open. Lucky bastard. Ran out so quick you'd think he missed his drag break or something. Well, he's right. I should see Aion before I leave. Think about her room, just like before.

"Oh Cassandra, welcome back. Did you need something?" Hermes immediately greets me. I appear in the centre of the lounge this time. Does that mean I'm getting better at this or is my location randomised every time I show up? Hopefully I don't end up lost somewhere out in the sands next time.

"Hermes, hey. Is Aion busy at the moment?"

"Aion isn't in currently. She left to go deal with some sort of time discrepancy."

"Time discrepancy? That sounds bad, will she be alright?"

"She will be fine, it was something she'd normally delegate to you. I think you should be concerned with yourself! You look like you were on the losing side of a fight! Are you ok?"

"Me? Oh yeah I'm, fine, mostly. I was about to head off to heal in the lab with Chrono. I just came by to let Aion know."

"Aion would undoubtedly raise hell against whoever did that to you. On top that she would also give you a stern lecture for getting into something bad so soon. For better or worse, she's gone."

"Any idea how long until she returns?" I ask him.

"I couldn't give you an exact time. Aion has been spending a bit more time on Earth with each visit. I have a feeling she's been doing it to cope with your loss. Visiting places the two of you used to go and eat or shop at. You're more than welcome to wait here for her however." If she's back on Earth then maybe I can…

"Did she mention the era she went to? Anything that could clue me in to her location?"

"Hmm, she did make mention of a cafe of sorts. Something she must during her time out. She's

always talking about it, even made me learn their menu items and such so she could have it here."

"Sounds like something Aion would want. Alright, thanks Hermes. I'll try looking for her on my own." He bows his head to me and walks off into the other end of the lobby.

Aion. Aion. Aion. Where is Aion? Feel her out, just like before. Somewhere along the flow of time, she is time. I'm connected with her. Always.

My World

"That's what it is. Chrono placed a warding spell on you. That's why it feels like he's moving." Aion's voice! So smooth and casual and… warding spell? What does that mean? Did he do something behind my back…

Before my eyes, the object of all my fantasising and daydreaming turns around. Her beautiful locks of hair spin around, befitting of a princess. Her marionette like body turns only with the movement required, no wasted energy or time between her movements. Finally, her perfect face graces me once more. Those shiny sapphire eyes. Those dashing cheeks. That stunning smile. Aion.

"Cass? Hello?" She speaks up again. Light from the window peers in behind her. It strikes just enough, just right, to make her shine. Her iridescent hair blooms in shades of the rainbow. I'm lost in her beauty again. Completely and totally under her spell. I should answer her…

"Aion! Hi! I wanted to see you so here I am. Sorry, I didn't ask ahead of time or anything I just saw Hermes and I wanted to see you and uh… I was wondering if you would maybe like to hang out… like we used to?" Gosh what am I saying? I'm nervous. I'm melting around her.

Aion steps away from the counter behind her. This is her kitchen. Her room. Her house back in… Japan? I remember spending a little time here before. The dragon…

"You wanted to see me? Darling, you need only ask." Like wild honey dripping off tree branch. The sweetness enters my mind and swoons me. I can smell her. She smells like Spring. Beautiful. Gorgeous. Amazing. Incredible. Aion is so perfect.

"What happened to your face? Did you do something for Chrono?" She slides her hand over my right cheek. I press myself into her. Her warmth. Her being. Aion.

I had forgotten about the bruises. Chrono's training did a number on me. We were supposed to go back to the lab so I could recover but… why do that when we can turn back time?

“I was with Chrono. We were training. I guess.” She tilts her head at me, rubbing my cheek in her palm.

“Doesn’t look like it went your way Cassandra.”

“I was starting to get it! It took me awhile but I can feel the stream of time better. Control it better. I’ll be better soon.” I smile at her. She shuts her eyes and gently smiles back at me. Her smile! The smile that launched a thousand year journey. The warm feelings that connect us manifest in her soft, gentle gestures.

“Oh? He’s teaching you to better control the flow? Interesting. He didn’t notify me of this.” She brings her other hand to my face. Now she has me at her mercy.

I stare at her, star struck. Our eyes are locked. I can’t help but get lost in the rich blue ocean colour that composes her eyes. This is what it’s all about. This is my battle. My raison d’être. All of my struggles. All of my victories. All of… well…

Aion brings her face into mine. Oh my god. My Goddess! Her lips are going in for an attack! I should form a defence with my own to meet hers. I shut my eyes. The warmth of her body presses into mine. Her lips crash into mine. We kiss. That scent again. Like a perfect spring day full of blooming flowers. This is bliss.

She pulls away, her hands falling from my body. I selfishly wish she hesitated. Took an extra moment. Just an extra second to share more of herself with me.

“There. Better than you were today.” I open my eyes up to her returning to the counter. She built me back up from the quivering puddle that first arrived her. I feel better now.

“Th-thanks Aion.” I swallow my lips, licking them to taste the remnants of her. Mostly better. I may have a case of extreme longing and desire raising my temperature.

“An amuse-gueule. It’s not much compared to the other day but I feel you deserve a little sugar.” Her head turns back, she winks at me. My heart skips a beat. Water from the sink faucet begins

running.

“Cassandra, why don’t you join me with a trip to a cafe? It’s not too far, just down the road.” She shuts the water off and dries her hands off on a towel hanging off of a hook.

“A cafe? I’d love to go with you Aion!” I reply with my utmost excitement. She smiles at me again and walks toward me. She takes my hands in hers, staring at me. Temperature rising…

“I’m going to get ready. Have a seat and wait for me. You remember this place, right? Take whatever you need while waiting.” She spins us both around in a small faux dance. She raises my right hand and locks eyes with me. She tenderly sets a kiss on it. Aion!

She let’s go of me and shows off the living room with her right hand. Then she travels into the hallway with a wave, vanishing into her room. I suppose it would be correct to say it’s been a thousand years since I’ve been here. Sounds of rummaging through clothing travel down the hall. Is she getting all dressed up for me? No. No way. I bet she’s just tidying up her room like she just did the kitchen. I wander over to the seating around the table we once shared. I take my spot and relax.

I gaze around the room. There were several splits in time here. One for several choices that culminated into the end of my Timeline. My Universe. Now here I sit, waiting for tea and biscuits.

I stare down at my feet, I hadn’t even noticed she removed my shoes. They’re sitting inside the entranceway next to her shoes. I forgot, I’m not supposed to wear shoes indoors. Well, not that I had a chance to get out of them. Hence why she did it for me. Amazing deduction Cass. I hear Aion’s door creak open. Steps travel down the hallway. She’s returning. I’m going to see her again! I just saw her and I will see more of her and I feel so giddy and excited and happy!

“Hey, I’m all set. Let’s go?” Aion reappears. Her outfit is perfect on her, as usual. Her shoulders are covered by the top of her… top. Below sits a very large window across her chest. Beneath are her boobs. She’s basically boasting her beguiling breasts. Suffice to say, she’s drop dead gorgeous. The keyhole top. The bold bodycon dress, form fitting, with a single leg showing… She’s so pretty

I'm going to faint! A nudge presses into my back.

"Are you daydreaming or something? C'mon silly." She steps into the entranceway with my hands locked into hers. She let's go of me and slides a pair of heels over her feet. They look so good on her. Everything looks good on her because she's so pretty.

I follow after her, fitting my boots back on. I open the door for her and we head out to town. First is down the large hill that hides her residence from the rest of the world. I definitely showed up at a good time. The weather isn't too hot. It isn't too cold either. It's spring time. The cherry blossom trees are blooming. I got here right on time. The whole city is in bloom. We're blooming again too.

"Did Chrono ask you to do anything else?" Aion's voice grabs my attention.

"He said he wanted me to return to the lab. We were going to use one of the treatment pods to heal my body."

"He wanted to use one of those machines? What a waste of time. You could've healed the wounds on your own. What were you two really up to?" She asks. I have no idea why Chrono wanted to use the pod but she is right. Either one of us could've healed my wounds, why did we need to return to the lab?

"It's just what he said. I'm not really sure what else there is to it. Oh, he did mention that I might need to get some sleep."

"Sleep? I think you've slept quite enough but I suppose that's a fair enough reason. Take a left up here." She holds out her arm, signalling me. I comply and follow the turn. She follows behind me. I feel like I sort of kind of remember where a cafe here was.

"I wanted to see you before we left so here I am. I didn't mean to intrude upon your day or anything Aion."

"Nonsense Cassandra. You wouldn't be a bother. In fact, I'm glad you sought me out. I can sense your improvement. Getting to my room in the castle is one thing. Finding me out here in your era

from the End of Time is another. You're accomplishing so much in such a short amount of time. Far more quickly than when I first started teaching you the flow. Well, a relatively short time."

"You think so? I suppose I am picking up control better now. It's like the method to do it just appears in my mind now."

"It just appears… That's good. Erm, good that you're picking it up. Chrono is a moron but you're not so I'm glad progress is being made." Praise from Aion?! I'm making progress! I'm improving and that makes her glad!

"Up ahead, the third door on the right Cass." I look down the row of various shops and restaurants. Our cafe is right here.

I open the door open and hold it open for Aion. Some sort of bell chimes at our entrance. A western style cafe. One of the employees approaches us, bowing to us both.

"Miss. Aion. A pleasure to have your company once more. Would you like a booth today or the counter?"

"Take us to a booth." Aion replies.

We're walked down further into the cafe together. It looks like the lighting is done with old world looking lanterns. No candles inside though. They're lightbulbs but it gives the place a cool, relaxed feel. Of course Aion looks perfect in it. Her skin warmly reflects the light back and she has a glow about her. I bet I'm glowing too with how red my face feels.

"Here we are, your booth. I'll be back shortly for your orders." The waiter hands us the menus, bows and hurries back to the front of the cafe.

"You may order anything and everything off of the menu Cass. My treat." She takes a seat in the booth and opens one of the menus up. I sit across from her and do the same. Let's see here.

Lots of the names of the foods and drinks here are in French. Extra fancy. Aion said I could have anything I want but I have no idea what's good and what isn't. Maybe she'll order whatever she

usually does and I can have some with her. We could share. Yeah, that might be for the best.

"Decided yet, Cass?" Aion says.

"Oh! I'm well, quite overwhelmed by it all. How about, if you know you're ok with it, we share whatever you order?" I shut the menu and look up at Aion.

"Share? I don't mind but it will all be to my liking. No getting upset if something isn't to your taste Cassandra." She says with her right index finger traveling along the list of teas. On the following page are various wines, beers and champagne. Nothing but the best for Aion.

"That's fine. We both know you have impeccable taste Aion. Whatever you pick will be perfect." I reply. She shoots a smirk at me and shuts the menu. She raises her hand for a moment. The sound of feet shuffling towards us returns.

"Ready to order?" The waiter says. Aion nods and hands her menu to him. I do the same.

"Yes we're ready. Let's start with the Mariage Frères Tea set. We'll have the French Blue. You can leave the pot with us. The Assiette de Jambon cru. We'll take that with… bread. Give us a quarter loaf. The Profiterole au chocolat. Are you still serving the Tarte Tatin?"

"Yes. This is the final week we'll be serving it."

"An order of that as well."

"Would you like it with fresh cream or Japanese vanilla ice cream?" The waiter asks. Aion shoots me a glance. Oh boy, oh geez. I know what I want but does she want the same? She raises an eyebrow at me, she totally wants me to choose.

"I-ice cream please." I quietly say the waiter. He smiles and writes it down on his little order pad.

"Anything else?" Aion looks back at the waiter.

"Lastly, a café liégeois. That will be everything." Aion tells the waiter. He bows his head to us once again.

"I will have that all prepared and sent to you as it completes. Enjoy." Another bow from the

waiter. He vanishes off into the counter area and kitchen where I'm sure they'll do everything to perfectly prepare Aion's order.

"You're in for a treat Cass. Some of the best tasting sweets in the country are here in this cafe." Aion says. She takes a deep breath and shuts her eyes. So pretty…

"Th-thank you Aion. You know, Morrigan and I often have afternoon tea. Maybe next time you're around we can all go at it together." Aion tilts her head at me. Did I say something I shouldn't have?

"You and Morrigan do that?" She asks.

"Yeah. Since Chrono likes to get dinner started late. Well, not really late but you know. So easy to lose track of what you think time is when you're never around it."

"And what do you and Morrigan do?"

"She shares stories with me. Tells me of heroes and their deeds. Heroes and their shame. It's like speaking to a book of myths and legends with her."

"A living Goddess."

"Yeah. She's fun to talk to. It's nice. I don't think she would be opposed to you joining us."

"Nor am I. We'll see." Aion replies. The clacking of plates and glass enters the atmosphere. Our order won't be far behind. I wonder what these things taste like. I know a little about the chocolate pastries and the tart.

"Your tea Miss. Aion." The waiter returns. Upon his tray are two tea cups sitting in two saucers. He sets them down in front of us then the pot that sits in its own sort of metal contraption. I guess that's to keep it from directly touching the wooden table.

The waiter sets down a little embossed bowl with a pair of tongs. Sugar must be in there. Finally, a small pitcher is set next to the bowl. Our milk and sugar. Should we want it. The waiter bows his head and lifts the tea pot. He pours a cup for me then does the same for Aion. Perfect.

“If you require anything else, please let me know.” He folds his arms behind his back with the tray in hand, bowing to us. He vanishes into the other end of the cafe once again.

“What tea is this? French Blue something?” I ask Aion. I take the tongs in my left hand and open up the bowl. Sugar cubes. I guess I shouldn’t have too many since we have those sweets on the way. I drop a single cube in my cup.

“It’s a velvety bergamot tea with the scent of royal blue flowers.” She casually replies. She takes a sip from her cup and looks at me. I don’t know what that really means…

“It’s a black tea with a slightly fruity taste. Don’t think too hard about it detective.” I must’ve made and confused face which prompted her to further explain. Alright, a black tea. That, I understand.

I take a drink from my cup. This is pretty good. Refreshing. Floral. Royally floral! This is delightful.

“It’s really good Aion. Thank you.” I smile at her. She smiles back.

The atmosphere is tranquil, even with the approaching footsteps from the waiter. He returns with a new tray of goodies. He sets down two plates. One with the pastries and the other with bread and what I think is ham. Jambon? Ham? Ham. From some sort of pitcher, our waiter hovers over the pastry plate. Slowly, chocolate sauce melds into our choux pastries, turning them into the Profiterole au chocolat. With another bow, our waiter takes his leave.

Aion picks up a slice of the ham and eats it. I do the same. She states at me expectantly, like she wants me to approve of all of her food choices. The ham is surprisingly succulent and seemingly melts in my mouth. A lingering sense of floral and grassy notes. There must be a little drizzle of olive oil on the ham that I didn’t previously notice. I guess having a piece of bread with this would be the way to go.

I tear off a small chunk of the bread and eat it. Suffice to say this is some sort of French bread.

Perhaps a baguette? Either way it tastes good too. Everything tastes good because things with bad taste have no place around Aion. She takes another sip of tea, still staring at me.

"It's good Aion. All of it's good. You only pick the best." She raises her chin at my words as if proud to be told that. Maybe she just wanted *me* to say it.

"That's good. Try the Profiterole." She nods her head toward the other plate.

Adorning the other silver tray is a carefully crafted assortment of pastries with chocolate adorning them. We already got a little peak at the craft when the waiter topped these off with the chocolate. I carefully lift one up, making sure not to let any chocolate drip where it shouldn't. Wait a second, if it did I could just stop time and prevent an accident. Whatever.

I take a bit out of half of the little treat. A rush of chocolate runs through my mouth while my tongue receives a blast of cream and bread over it. All together they meld into a heavenly mixture. A tasty treat. I can't help but put my other hand on my cheek, lest it otherwise fall down from the wonderful taste.

Aion does the same, grabbing a bite for herself and putting the whole thing in her mouth. I can see her smile creek behind her chewing. This is really good. We continue back and forth between the two plates, finishing up both the the best of our ability. What that means is we devour everything as ladylike as we can.

Our treat delivering garçon returns with a third plate. Sitting on top of it is a peculiar slice of tart. I certainly didn't expect to see this. Silverware is set down for the two of us with and with a bow, we're left alone once again.

"Neat, right? It's upside down. The apples are caramelised in butter and sugar and the pastry bread is on the bottom. The dish was created by exceptional pair of chefs." Aion says as she takes a spoon in hand. She carves out a piece and sticks the spoon out towards me. Oh. Oh! OH! She wants to give me the first bite. She's feeding me. She's so sweet! Sweeter than any treat!

I take a bite of the tart, my mouth is quickly filled with a delicious rush of sugar. I must be in heaven because everything is working out. Everything is like how it was. How we were. Aion isn't going to destroy everything anymore. I'm not shouting at the top of my lungs to talk to her. We're having a nice time.

Aion pulls the spoon back, chopping her own portion off with some ice cream. Oh, I'm jealous. She should've put a little on for me. Aion takes her bite and smiles. She likes it too. Well, of course she likes it. This is a cafe she undoubtedly frequents. She knows what's good and what isn't. She has that high taste. Or maybe she just wanted me to try a little bit of everything. Either way, I love it.

"Cassandra. What do you think? Being back in your correct era of time after who knows how long?" She sets the spoon down and stares at me.

I haven't thought about any of that. As usual my thoughts are occupied by her. If anything, it means more to me that she's spending time with me again. I guess that and thoughts of my "self." No external commentary when I'm around Aion. I wonder if that means something. Is *she* afraid of being around Aion? I guess most people would be. Such a demanding and conceited person… no… Goddess. It's difficult being around something like that. But somehow we match up. Like we're made for each other. Oh that thought puts a smile on my face!

"I guess it's nice. It's nice being here with you. The era doesn't matter to me too much. As long as I… you know… we can be together. Spend time together. It's nice." She scoffs at my reply, partially covering her mouth. Maybe she was taken back by what I said. That was unexpectedly cute…

"Being together again? We'll be spending much time together again Cassandra. I'm sure you don't mind." She takes the spoon and carves out another slice, carefully holding it out to me. It's like she's reading my mind and telling me exactly what I want to her. This is so perfect.

The spoonful she feeds me is with plentiful tart and ice cream. I bite in, another serene flood of confection paints itself across my tongue and cheek.

Aion takes another bite and we go back and forth until we finally complete the reverse tart. She sets the plate to the side and waves her hand. At her command, the waiter returns. Carrying our finale dessert, the café liégeois. More ice cream… Coffee ice cream…

I look to Aion for her approval, she nods at me. I take the large glass in hand. It's cold to the touch. Ice cold. It's like the cup was stored next to the ice cream in the freezer! I grab a spoon and dig all the way into the bottom. I'll have a nice mixed layer to further envelope my mouth in sweet dreams. I take a bite of the frozen treat and feel time stop to a stand still. This is so delicious it's unreal! How could something so bitter cold taste so charming? How is it possible to fall in love with something with such a juxtaposition?!

Aion places her hand on mine and laughs. Man… did I actually freeze time and not realise it? She takes the cup over to her half of the table and the spoon out of my hand. She pulls her own mountain of ice coffee cream and seemingly enters her own personal moment of delicate delight. I think it's fair to say we both missed eating treats together.

Little words are exchanged between us. We finish our icy, final concoction together. We exist together, in the moment. I feel happy. Genuinely happy. I'm so glad I came here. So glad I improved using the flow of time. So glad she's here. So in…

"Aion?"

"Cassandra?"

"I love you."

"Oh yeah? Well, I love you too. Why don't we get back to Chrono. I know that idiot has a reason for wanting you to rest so listen to him."

Emotions/9

“Shall we head off then?” Chrono's voice comes from behind this time.

“Yeah let's do it. Where's the portal?” I turn around and watch him. He tilts his head to the right, towards the library.

“The archive and the library are the same room. The portal just splits them apart so it's all for the sake of convenience really.” He pushes forward into the library and I follow. Doesn't look like Morrigan is in at the moment. The room is dead silent, even the sound of the door opening doesn’t make much sound. Opposite where I would typically have tea is a curiously configured circle drawn on the floor. Chrono claps his hands together and the circle lights up a with mystical bluish looking arcane colour. He gestures me to step in before him and I comply.

No different from teleporting myself, it's done in an instant. I have the chance to look at the archive but it doesn't seem as interesting as the library was. Not by a long shot. It was just the computer room at the end or rather the front of the lab. Such a let down. Chrono pops in a moment after me and claps his hands again.

“Well, here we are. You're somewhat acquainted with this room, right?” He asks me.

“I have some, memories, of it. Not the best but I sure would've liked knowing about all this before hand.”

“Sorry about your rocky start.” I don’t hear sincerity in his tone.

“Right…” I reply.

“Let's head back to the medical pods then yeah?” I nod at him and he pushes forward into the room where the AI computer is held. I follow him in and after adjusting to the brightness, I look at the machine with different eyes now. Knowing what it is and what it does this time around gives me a bittersweet feeling. This thing is the future of technology. It's nothing short of peak brilliance.

Instead, it will sit here for eternity doing errand for these two lazy gods. An eternity. Does a machine understand what an astronomical amount of time that is? Can it comprehend it like I can? Can I even comprehend it? Something that will exist for an eternity…

“Hey Chrono?”

“Yes, Cassandra? What's up?”

“How do you like, exist for all eternity?” I ask him my philosophical question.

“How do I exist? What do you mean?”

“Like, what do you do? Won’t you get bored and eventually lose your mind or something?”

“Bored? Ahaha oh no. Cass, I get what your asking but I don't at the same time.”

“What do you mean Chrono?”

“Our views on time are incompatible. You will never understand how I or even Aion see it. It's quite literally beyond you.”

“Beyond me?”

“You'll never understand what it means to exist for eternity because you don't have an infinite existence. You are here for a very, very brief amount of time and can only understand and absorb information in the environment you were created and raised in.” We cross the bridge into the medical wing. I'm just going to call it a medical wing since this is where the medical pods are located. Just the same as it was I when I awoke from those horrible dreams. Chrono brings up good points though. I can't understand what eternity is, I can only understand what I know. Wait… Created?

“The environment I was made and raised in? Like with my family and growing up in a community.”

“Exactly. You're human after all. That is the boundary of your knowledge. You do have a bit of extra knowledge though, with time travelling but even then, you're still moving at the human rate.

You will age, you will grow, you will experience everything in the span of a hundred years or so like every other human. For instance when I allow you to return “home” you will have to be pushed forward a few years to make up for lost time. I can't allow you to return to the period of time at which you first left.” When he allows me to return? Why does that sound slightly ominous?

“Alright so what about you then? What do you do to not be bored?”

“It's not so much about doing for Gods. The concept of boredom doesn't exist to us. It's more like, making sure things run. Although Aion is the current God, she had abandoned her duties for a brief period in time. Chaos ensued and now we work towards fixing that issue. Things like that. There are some Gods or well actually most Gods are rather hands off nowadays. Lazy you could say. Maybe every once in awhile they inspire some random person in the universe, giving them knowledge or a divine message. They typically prefer to entertain themselves with the methods they enjoyed while ruling. It’s much easier to enjoy the boundless pleasures and joys of existence without having to manage humans.”

“So you either work for eternity or indulge in food, drink, sex and other stimuli for eternity?”

“No, it's not really work. To a human it's work, something you do to give yourself meaning or something like that. Right? We don't require stimuli, we are the stimuli that you all depend on.” He glances at me and smiles.

“But I am quite literally, time. This is my meaning. This is my existence. No different than a light bulb used to illuminate a dark room. I am time and time will always push forwards. Aion perhaps got a little too influenced by humans, making her break away from her duties. I wonder who had that effect on her hmm?” He says with a sassy tone at the end.

“So you just do what you are supposed to do. What you exist to do. If anything perhaps it is us that don't understand eternity. The finite amount of time you have causes you to seek meaning to life. But how can anything retain meaning after every second that eternity passes?” He speaks up.

“Only by being aware you have finite amount of time… right?” I chime in.

“It is as it is all intended. Even if you aren't consciously aware of it Cass. It all happens anyways. Perhaps you should instead think about, *whether or not being aware of it is important to you*. You have proposed that it is work that gives meaning but if you aren't thinking about the work you do, does it retain meaning?” I can't speak on that right now. I can't say if that's right or wrong. I'm not very old myself and whatever answer I come up with now might change in 50 years.

“Hey, the pod is ready for you. I set it for eight hours. Basically treat this like a nights worth of sleep that will magically make you feel better tomorrow.” I nod at him and remove my shoes, stepping inside and laying down.

“Eight hours! No more no less, got it!” I shout at him. He chuckles at the sharpness of my voice and nods.

“Eight hours. I'll be around so don't worry. The real me that is.”

“What are you going to do while I'm sleeping?”

“I think I'll start looking into the moving process for Aion. I'd like to combine things between the two castles as soon as possible.”

“How do you plan on doing that?” I ask.

“Well this castle would just go on top of the other, something like a reflection in the sky. A God’s mirror.” He replies. I’m curious to see how it will look.

“That sounds complex. Aion definitely did design it huh?”

“Well the top of her castle is her room which would in turn be closest to this room which is similarly found at the top of this castle. Like I said, a mirror.”

“Yeah I guess. Anyways just let me know what to do to get this healing underway.”

“Just lay down inside and I'll take care of the… rest. Ahem.” I comply with Chrono’s instruction, shutting my eyes to get some rest. I think it's actually kinda weird this thing fits my body almost

perfectly. It doesn't go much further beyond my feet so it's only for people around my height. This thing wouldn't fit Chrono at all but I guess it makes sense. Why would he need to heal himself when he could just reverse the condition of the wound? But to go a step further, why is there a room full of these devices that he can't use? Aion maybe. But why?

“I'm going to shut the pod now Cass. Sweet dreams.” I can hear his keyboard clicking away. I'd be glaring at him right now if I could. This is not the place to talk about dreams!

The top of the machine lowers and shuts. I can hear a rush of air blasting out of the sides.

I'm a little excited. This is the first time I'm consciously entering this thing. But it’s going in better this time, right? I learned a lot. So much. Aion still loves me. I still love her. Chrono is somewhat reliable, he is a little shady though. Morrigan and her sisters were nice to me. Oh, Iwako is pretty funny too.

Even I turned out better than expected, right?

Lost Innocence/10

You did come around, eventually. Why was that?

Well I couldn't cross the icy bridge on my own. I recognise my position as the loser of our fight. Unlike Aion. If she didn't lose then you wouldn't be here.

What do you mean, like literally wouldn't be here or?

I'm sure there's a timeline that exists where you lost, why not take a look some day?

I don't think so. We were at the end of time and I recall Aion saying something about the end of time being unable to record events. Plus I'm still the last Cassandra. I have to fix things…

Somewhere out there is a you that never gets abducted by a me. A you that reconciles her differences with Aion a different way.

No it's not unfortunate. It's like Chrono said, everything happens is intended to happen.

The will of causality. Or some nonsense. I have something in mind for you myself.

Oh, and what's that?

If that other human that The Watcher took can learn our magic then I don't see why I can't teach you some.

Magic? Who mentioned anything about magic hmm? Is there something you're not telling me either?

Ah, I did it again.

Chrono can get away with it on account of him being like, my bosses boss. You on the other hand, have some explaining to do.

I have no such explaining to do. That's the beauty of free will. I may not have a body but I still have a voice. Here, let me show you something.

I feel myself imagine a spacious, empty, plain room. I wasn't the one thinking of it. Like my brain was hijacked but I was still in control. No, I remember this feeling. It's like the dream I regained consciousness in. It wasn't particularly fearsome this time around. Is that a good thing or a bad thing? Maybe it just goes to show how fucked in the head I've become.

Oh was the last time really that fearsome? It was just a, what's the word, a new experience.

It was horrifying.

Well this too, may be considered horrifying but I'm going to share some knowledge with you. Hopefully it'll work and be of use to you someday.

What's going on? Am I imagining it or did I already fall asleep?

This is my domain, which means you've fallen asleep. Welcome to The Dreamlands.

How courteous of you. Dragging me back to a future source of my trauma.

Let me take possession of your body. I can show my tricks to use in a fight.

I don't need to fight or do tricks. I'm just working with Aion.

All I've seen you do is use tricks to fight! You're a natural!

I tricked Aion like twice! And we hardly even fought! I was running away from her most of the time!

You tricked me! Acting like you didn't know I was there. Hiding the knife. Your actions have directly led you here. Don't tell me you don't play even a little dirty!

Long, string-like appendages, bubble up from beneath the ground where I was standing. Not the me that I am but the version of me that stares back at myself, independent of my movement and control. The strings are perpendicular to the shadow, they remind me of elbows. Beyond that they stretch out further beyond me. I could fathom a guess that they're about 10 meters or so long. The image of the horror possessing my own body vividly sears itself into my mind. For all our back and forth bickering, I have been in the presence of The Great Old One the whole time. Would that make

me greater then, for besting it?

I feel the embrace of the darkness but not by any normal means. No, it was disturbing and sickening but if I show I'm afraid, it'll know. It'll take advantage of those feelings. It'll trap me again. It wraps itself around my shadow on the ground, a violation of my form I had never thought possible. Over my body, above my chest, around my neck. I am suffocating yet I can look down at my body and see no hands upon it.

I see no reason for you not to give in here. Let me show you what I can do.

I struggle to push my voice out, the phantom grip over my being prevents me from doing so. But I notice something. I'm finally alone in my head. They can't read my thoughts right now. That's a relieving feeling. I'm finally me again, right? It's quiet. Silent.

Perfect.

In the single moment I took to relish in the fact I wasn't a psychopath, I could feel myself shrink away in my own body. Not just feel it, I could see it. I was staring from the other side. I'm now the shadow of myself. How shrewd, they took no time at all to rob me of the feeling.

With me, you'll be able to learn twice as fast. Perhaps quadruple, no, quintuple the rate. If I can get something to work.

Quintuple? What are you doing?

She put my finger up to my mouth, silencing me. I should've figured questions weren't going to get me very far with them. If we've come this far and I haven't been murdered yet, I suppose that's a sign of trust. Or I'm talking crazy in my head. Who knows. Maybe I've already died and haven't realised it yet.

It seems we both need partners.

Partners?

My hands clap together, I turn around, whispers spew out of my mouth.

Alone locked in your cage.

For your freedom I give exchange. Time for you to come out.

From evening to dawn, two more no doubt. Together we're four.

Who is behind you now?

Oh god, what is this? More lunatics? We have a *full house* now don't we? The grip on my shadow let's go. The ghastly tentacles that gripped me shrink away, back to their “master's” body.

This only works briefly. Clones if you will. Copies of the illustrious Cassandra Watson.

And this is… What does this do for me?

They do things you don't want to do. Like for instance, die.

Are you saying I could swap my body out with a fake me that will die for me while frozen in time and nobody would know?

Oh, that's a brilliant idea. Yes do that instead!

Instead of what? What were you thinking?

I was thinking of using the five of us to gang up on our enemies to beat them to a bloody pulp and whichever of us dies gets left behind as the weakest link. The famed survival of the fittest.

I strangely feel like that doesn't apply here but, strength in numbers does have benefits.

Plus more of you means more experience gained. Like I mentioned, how much can five Cassandra's learn in a single day?

So is this my training arc? Going to have me run around Philadelphia for a few hours?

Is that what you want?

Eh I mean I don't know, four copies of myself. Doesn't seem that cool to be honest. Thousands, millions of years to be this grand evil monster and that's it?

That's it?! How ungrateful! That is taboo! Forbidden magic!

What's so taboo about that?

It induces a serious amount of chaos. Having multiple copies of anything run around, trying to identify the real user and stopping them was deemed too difficult for most of us.

Huh? Interesting. The most of you? Now who would that be exactly?

Worry not about who! That's not the point! What I'm getting at is that you must appreciate me doing this for you.

Right... So I can scare someone and learn quicker. Fearsome.

Oh you, you think that's it? That I've no more tricks up my sleeve? I will teach you one more then. Something I had been playing with for the entire time I was attempting to steal your body.

Wow. Can't wait. Please, tell me more.

Good. Now you're starting to recognise my power. Let's unravel common sense further shall we?

Unravel further? Why not?

This is the energy stored for a thousand years. This is the power of destruction hidden in the depths of my soul. With this I shall accomplish; That which has to be done.

Her… my hand extends out to me and I reach out for it. My palm rest over hers, I feel anxious. I'm suddenly aware of my breathing, my heart's beating, my eye's blinking. I was becoming aware of the world around me. I was waking up. This was the feeling of strength. Not like muscles or emotions. Like raw, undisturbed power. The sun with all of it's energy is the feeling in my hand. An explosion at my fingertips. Destruction.

Call my power when you need it and you will annihilate your enemies.

My enemies? What enemies? I'm just human. I'm no god. I'm not Aion. Not Chrono. Not you. I have nobody I need to fight, to kill.

YOU might not but there may be a creature that sees you as prey. Something out there that wants you dead. Are you saying you will simply roll over for them?

No I… I wouldn't need to. Aion will save me. Chrono will help me. You could do it, take my

body, fight for me.

What are you afraid of?

Afraid? I'm a detective, I help people. I bring closure. I'm normal.

You're anything but normal Cassandra. That ship has long since sailed.

I just… it's all happening so fast. I've only had a few days to myself since waking up. I need to...

So the four other Cassandras was totally ok but this is what freaks you out? What the hell is your deal?

I've already got two voices in my head but taking care of three more? All of this is bigger than me. This is much, much bigger. There's a sinking feeling inside me. I feel anxious. I feel scared. My heart knows that this is a boundary I shouldn't cross. I become more like you and it's like you never needed to take my body. Just as you learned to be me, I now learn to be you. It's wrong. This is all wrong.

Some day you might need to use my power. You can't expect Aion to do everything for you. Isn't it the other way around? Aren't you her errand girl? We're here because of the choices we both made Cassandra. You are I. I am you. We are one.

No. No no no. I'm me…I can't…you're the… I… I've only dealt with humans. Sure there have been a few special cases but I've never needed to kill something. I'm not you. I'm nothing like you.

Do not deny me. To deny me is to deny yourself. We are two halves of a whole.

No! I can't! I'm not. I can't! Please!

Cassandra?

My head is light. I can't think. Breathing heavy. I need air. I'm suffocating. I need to breathe. Aion. Where's Aion. I need someone. Something. Anything. It's closing in on me. The world. Everyone. It's pushing in on my stomach and making me sick. Staring at me. Their eyes. They know what I am. How disgusting I am. My corrupted body and soul. The voice in my head. It's something

I can’t comprehend. Something I don’t want to understand. Something I don’t want to see. Something I’m forced to see… Something I’m forced to understand… Something I’m forced to comprehend…

Part Four- Sins of the Innocent

New Order-1

"You won't feel a thing, it'll be just like the last time we did this. Lay back and relax, I'll handle the rest." I shut my eyes and listen to the creaking metal of the pod. The shutting door tells me that the process is seconds from beginning. I had done this process once before, but I also haven't. The last time was a forced dream. An attempt to for a monster to study my thoughts, behaviour, my actions to become the perfect copy of me. This time I'm entering the dream by my choice. That doesn't make me feel any particularly better about it though. It's strange but what I need to learn is hidden away and this is the easiest method to access it.

"Knock on the glass when you're ready Cassandra and I'll begin the induction process." I raise my right hand without delay and tap the glass. Let's get this show started.

Ring ring

Ring ring Ring ring

Ring ring

"Sorry, she's already gone out for the day!" Setting the phone down, Morrigan sighs heavily. She returns to keeping up the appearance of their home. Things like tidying up the living room table and taking a couple bowls to the kitchen sink and cleaning up the counters. The second bowl of food is half eaten, her absent roommate only partially eating before heading to work for the day. She left to a neighbouring town for a special job. It paid at a higher rate than usual so the two girls decided it was worth taking. Even if it meant an extended time away from each other.

Not that time was ever an issue for Aion. Even after the *Advent*, she's still capable of hold some sway over the flow of time. Not enough to go back and prevent it but…enough.

The familiar tone of the phone springs to life again. More popular than ever, Aion's Maid Service is in high demand. Even the worst of messes are cleaned up, in time, by the ultimate maid. She can do it all in an instant, but she charges by the hour. This way she gets an entire day of pay to do a job that takes on a moment to finish. As the phone continues to ring, Morrigan recites the line for the millionth time, "Sorry, she's not here! Would you like to set up an appointment?" Unfortunately, Aion doesn't give out her personal number, so the calls always go to the house phone. That's where her secretary takes care of things.

Morrigan reaches for the phone and answers the call, "AVE! Aion's Perfect Cleaning Service, we can clean it no matter what!" With her usual spiel, Morrigan speaks, awaiting to deliver the news that Aion can't be reached.

"Hello. Morrigan? It's me." Morrigan's eyes widen at the sound of the voice on the opposite end of the phone. She is happy to hear the voice but quickly filled with anxiety by the possible reasons

for this voice to contact her and Aion out of the blue.

“Oh. OH! HEY! Wh-what has you calling us today? I mean…what’s up? How’s the life and such uh…going? Are you well? Is everyone doing well?” She shoots the questions out in rapid succession, her feelings taking over the situation more than her mind.

The voice responds and in turn, asks a few questions of their own. Small talk passes until the voice finally lands on the question Morrigan had originally planned on answering.

“Oh… Aion… She’s not here.” Morrigan replies.

“Would you pass the message on to her then?” The voice replies. “Yeah… yeah of course. I’ll let her know you guys want to see her.” “Thank you Morrigan. Take care!”

“You too!” Click.

The call ends and Morrigan breathes a heavy sigh of relief. She smiles, a face of hope that has long been hidden by the despair that weighs heavy on her shoulders. On every Ministry member’s shoulders. Both Current and Former. Morrigan picks the phone back up and dials for Aion. Unsure of how Aion will take it however, she’s not completely confident in what she’ll end up saying. She secretly hopes Aion will just let it go to voice mail. It’d be a bigger relief to talk to the robot voice than Aion’s at the moment. Fortunately, the ringing ends and the beep goes to voice messaging.

“Hey Aion. Eris called from Aulis. She said she has a job for you. I’m not sure if she meant like, cleaning job or job… job…. but she wanted me to ask. How are Aion? I hope you’re ok. I know you’ll be back late so don’t feel bad. I’m ordering something tonight instead of cooking because I’m not feeling 100% today. See you later. I… see you later!”

If Only/1

"No more messages."

I put my phone into my bag and stare out into the world for a few moments. So broken, fragmented, shattered across time and space. Just like us. Ah, heh, what am I thinking? Job's done. I suppose I could humour the request and see what Eris wants. Although, she's probably doing it on behalf of someone else. I start my motorbike up and head home. Aulis is on the way back. It's just a small detour, nothing big.

I make sure everything is packed in securely and tap the right side of my bike, making sure my sword is still in place. Out of the corner of my eye, I spy a puddle of water. A puddle? Out here? Rain hasn't fallen since the Advent. I close my eyes and shake my head, returning my sight to the puddle. It's gone. I double tap the side of my bike where my sword is, to reassure myself. Not that anything out here is a threat to me but… with how things are these days. I put my goggles on and begin driving. The sun starts it's decent to the underworld. The moon will soon take its place. I'll have enough daylight, and if I don't, I'll make enough daylight. I check the mirror on my left. Is there someone there? I turn around to look. Nobody there. That's the second time I thought I saw something out of place. People out in the middle of nowhere? I'm just tired. Stopping time to clean everything up must've taken more out of me than usual.

My left arm tenses up. It's a burning, stinging sensation. I wince in pain for just a moment and shut my eyes. It's getting worse. My body is failing. I think-

BOOM

The unusual sound makes me reflexively freeze time. No chance for the usual fancy snap. What was that? An explosion? Where? I stop and survey the area, trying to discover the source of the

sound. Nothing out of the ordinary. That means something definitely not ordinary is going on. I look back, searching for a clue but nothing is behind me either. There's a chance that this is all in my head, Terrors that still haunt me in my day to day life. The lingering grasp of failure that left a permanent mark on my soul.

In front of my bike, a few dozen meters at most, is a trident? A trident? Out here? Damn, this pain in my arm is really ramping up. It crawls into my chest. I lose control of the flow of time and it starts progressing once more. I can't let my focus break while stopping time. I'm not strong enough to multi-task with it anymore. My bike rapidly approaches the trident at full speed. I turn slightly to the left to avoid the foreign tool and that's where I see it again. The same figure that I had thought I'd seen in my mirror earlier. A shining creature leaps out at me. It's right hand is reaching towards me, as if it's trying to grab me. Tough luck, you're gonna need more than that to catch me! I freeze time once more speed ahead beyond the trident. What in the world is a trident doing out here? Does it belong to this weirdo?

"Where's Watson?!" The unknown woman screams at me.

WHAT?! This isn't possible. She's tugging on my skirt?! How? Time is frozen! Only I can move while the world is frozen in stasis! Then she?! I look to the side and see a pool of water! Water!? Out here in the middle of nowhere? A hand is sticking out of it?! What the hell!?

A girl in white robes rises out of the water and pulls on my skirt with both hands. I slam the side of my bike with my right foot and my sword pops out. Unfortunately, it doesn't seem to phase whatever the hell is holding on to me. I grab my sword with my right hand, continuing to steer with my left. I swing it at the slick figure, hoping it'll do something!

My action is reward as she lets go of my skirt and sinks away. So she has some capacity for intelligence, she recognised that I was going to be attack her. Well, if time stop doesn't affect her I might as well cancel it. No point in wasting energy on something that's not going to provide me

with an upper hand here. As time begins to flow again, I check my mirrors for the creature.

Incredible, it can think and move while time is frozen. I guess I've finally met my match. A whirling sound comes from my left side. Something is moving extremely fast. It's heading right for me. Well, it's been thrown from a predictable location at least. Plus, it's a physical object, I can manipulate time to get out of harms way. The sound approaches, it's near but I can feel it slowing down. Guess it's user didn't account for physics, or maybe they over-estimated their strength. I don't even need to use time for this. I can just dodge it. I spin my bike around to look at it. I know I'll dodge it.

Whish

I push my head forward slightly and it grazes the air above me. A complete miss. Too easy! Amateur probably thought a beautiful maiden all out on her lonesome would make for an easy target. Think again!

Ding

There we go, must've hit a rock or something ahead of me. Whatever. They're not a threat. I flip my bike forward. There, I'm almost home free. Aulis is straight ahead. I can see their large mansion type building on the cliff side. I guess I should deal with whatever is attacking me now. Leading this thing to other people is dangerous.

Whish

WHAT?! That sound! I look towards the fallen trident. It's flying back at me?! What the- My thoughts are cut short as the trident nicks my goggles, knocking them off of my face.

I can feel blood running down from the upper right side of my head. I keep my eyes on the trident. It's flying in mid air! But where to?

I slow down to stop. I turn around to watch where it goes. It returns into a girl standing in the sky upon a mountain of stone. She stares down at me. My eyes meet hers and I stare back. What a smug

face she has on her mug. She raises her other hand as if she is waving at me then she slams her trident into the ground. The sound echoes throughout the area as if she's claiming ownership of it.

Hmph. So you got a hit on me, don't let it get to your head! She turns away, slowly sinking into the ground. Her bright white robes become diaphanous as if they were being wet by water. Well, she is some sort of water monster. For whatever reason, she's leaving now. What did she want from me? I didn't expect anything like that to happen today but it was the most exciting thing I've done in months. Now the call from Eris is starting to make sense. It means trouble. I should just go home but I don't want to make Morrigan look bad by not showing… Whatever. I pick up my goggles. Surprisingly, they're not damaged. That's odd. Sad to say that my face didn't receive the same treatment.

I pull up to the extravagantly sized home on the edge of the hills in Aulis. I don't imagine anyone else lives out here anymore. I put my sword back into the side of the bike, locking it back in place. Eris comes racing down the stairs to the house to meet me.

"HeyAion!Longtimenosee!Haveyoubeenwell?How'sbusiness? Lifetreatingyouwellbuddy?" She practically vomits all her words out onto me. I think I caught the gist of it. Same ol' Eris. She still has that charm about her.

"Yeah… hey… it has been a while huh? I'm well. I hope you've been too." I finish speaking and give her a hug.

"Yeah, I'm well. I'm glad you showed up. Let me show you up to the house and we can all talk there." As I thought, Eris did this on behalf of the others. They still can't give it up can they?

"Right, yeah. Let's head up then?" Eris breaks away from the hug and smiles at me. She leads the charge, walking me up the stairs and to the door inside.

"You first!" She brightly exclaims.

"Thank you Eris and sorry for doing this." I enter the room and instantly freeze time. I shut the

door and lock it, ensuring that she doesn't have to see the ugliness that is about to arise. The conversation that I'll be having with the other two girls here isn't going to be pleasant.

I resume time and can hear Eris yelling outside the door. Sorry again, Eris. I watch the door to the right of the living room open up. Right on cue.

"Aren't you sweet? Am I allowed in?" I ask the sickly looking woman that walks in. Nature pretends as if she didn't hear me. Instead she looks around the room and then at me.

"How long as it been, Aion?" Ceres calls out.

"Why did you call Morrigan?" I ignore her question.

"We're a team aren't we? You brought us together." She replies.

"I brought us together? Oh no, both of you wanted to keep an eye on me." I ignore her again, she ignores me again. That's how most of our conversations went. This is how they still go.

"And we prevented the worst possible scenario from happening... All together."

"I'm not here to reminisce. If that's all then I'm out." I cut her off while I walking towards the door. Reaching for the handle, I hear one final call.

"We need your assistance, Aion." Cordelia's voice travels from the open door. Ceres extends her arm toward the room, inviting me within.

"After that shit you pulled? We're through." I shout back at the voice that calls from the other room. She shifts the space around me. I find myself sitting at a table with two other women. They sit together on the same side. I sit alone on the opposite.

"I acknowledge that dropping the heavens onto the world wasn't the best choice but with the time that we had, it was better than the alternative. Are you saying you are the sole decider of that choice being right or wrong? I think we are all responsible in one way or another for the dying state the world has found itself in. It still is, however, our responsibility to set things right. All of us, together, Aion." Cordelia speaks up. The first time I've heard her voice in a long time. Ceres whispers

something into Cordelia's ear. These two cling on to the embers of a flame that has long since faded.

Cordelia stares downward, raising her head only slightly when speaking. As if very carefully, she's keeping her eyes hidden from me. I can only make out the lower half of her face. She could use a haircut.

"We want your help Aion!" That voice calls out from beyond the room. Oh Eris, still can't take a hint can you?

"We've been fervently searching around the world for remnants of life. Utilising the full capability of nature, or rather, what remains. We didn't come up with much unfortunately." Cordelia says. The Ministry member she's referring to sits stoically by her side. Ceres. Ever the thorn in my side. I relish in the fact that these two are just as damaged as I am. Guess neither of you should have left Morrigan to do it on her own huh?

"Although, she did notice a new life form appeared on the planet." She remains silent for a few more moments, perhaps hoping I'll entertain her idea and give her some back and forth conversing. Not that she'll get it, I'm done working with them. I've been done.

"The seas the south of here. We were hoping to get you to try reversing time there. Shortly after discovering it, it vanished."

"A new life form? In this age?" I reply.

"You know what they say, life finds…" She trails off. Is she hiding something from me? They don't trust me. Leaving information on a need to know basis and I don't have a need.

"What does that have to do with me? What did you find?" I ask.

"As our former leader, it is in our best interest to keep coordinated." Cordelia says, lifting her head "We all, find it in all of our best interest to get the gang back together."

"You didn't answer my question. Actually, who cares. I've moved on. Found something else to do. You two should consider the same." I look away and my eyes land on a clock on the wall. I gave

that life up. How much could a single person matter at this point?

“Do cleaners have scars on their faces? What’s that cut above your eye Aion?” Cordelia fires a couple questions at me.

“I fell.”

“And you didn’t… rewind time on the wound?” Her words dig into me. I bite my tongue, trying not to go off on her for that.

“Or perhaps… you don’t control the flow as well as you did in the past now?”

“Yeah? So? What of it? None of us hold our full power anymore. That’s the price we paid.” I reply. It upsets me that we have to continue doing this. She knows it just as much as I do. Probably wanted to get that rise out of me.

“I get it, I get it. I apologise for my behaviour but you’re all we have Aion. Look, you’re the only girl that won't come back. Morrigan is open to the idea, why aren't you?” I let out a laugh for myself. Is it out of pity or shame?

“Heh… I was never one of you and you know it. I was forced into this role and you’re both still upset about it. Let it go.” I get up and turn around to leave the room. I stare at the partially open exit and see Eris poking her face through the opening. I guess I do have one thing I'd like to know.

“Who's... Watson?” I ask.

“Watson? Who’s that? I don’t know any Watson.” The grand woman at the table returns a lie in exchange for my previous one. An annoying trait that tells me our conversation is over.

“All we want Aion, is a chance to fix things. To give the world hope that the sun will continue to rise tomorrow and the day after that.” She raises her right arm and opens up her hand. Is she serious? I mean maybe I could consider it if they're sincere with their words and actions.

“Cordelia… What is there to rebuild? All lights eventually burn out.” Trailing off I enter my own thoughts. To fix things, the balance needs to be repaired. I know she’s right. I just don't know if I

can even try. The loss of humanity has had its effects on me as well. I know with each passing day I get weaker and weaker. My body is giving up as there are less and less people reliant on time. Not only that, there are simply less people in general. My body is struggling. My arms will probably be the first part of me to fade away.

"How long?" I stare at Cordelia while speaking. I need some sort of answer.

"How long? For what?" She replies. Infuriating. I can't with this woman.

"How long does the planet have?" Depending on the answer, I may come around and give what little I have left. Cordelia limply raises her right hand and Ceres steps forward.

"At it's current rate, ecological collapse is right on our doorstep. The debris from Cordelia's impact can't be removed quick enough. Although we have made progress there are still areas east and south to the impact zone with dim skies. Biodiversity is crashing and globally, soil has degraded much quicker than I had anticipated." Ceres explains.

"I predict we have four days to fix these issues. I suppose it's three now, seeing as the day is ending. Ceres and I have spent much of the day adjusting what we can but we need you Aion."

"C'mon Aion! Think about it! We could do so much together! We could even try summoning Ka-" The high-pitched voice intrudes and stabs needles through my heart. Summon? Her? I couldn't. I couldn't look her in the eye and tell her I failed. I can't.

"I'm good." I make my way out and run down the stairs to my bike. I hold back the tears forming in my eyes. I can't.

I'm sure they'll have much to discuss now. More importantly however…what am I going to do with this information? We already failed. We already lost. Balance overtook the scales.

I get back on to my bike to return home. The motor starting up interrupts the calm air of the new Ministry headquarters. Secret base? Or a place to hide from the world? Whatever. It's done. Let them do whatever they want. It's all gone to hell anyways.

I fit my goggles over my face and start the drive home. The sharp pain starts crawling up my left arm again. My chest, my head. This is happening more and more often. Well, it could be worse. In fact, I'm plenty aware of what can be worse. I pull my left arm away from the bike handle and leave the control to my right. The road ahead is clear. There is no way I run into anything out here a second time. I dangle my right hand down on the side of the bike. I feel around for my blade just in case someone or something feels like testing their luck again. I'm not going to let myself get jumped a second time. The life form they mentioned, is that what the girl earlier was? A creature made of water?

The sun starts to set over the valley, the temperature of the air is dropping. Feels a lot colder nowadays, I wonder if that's also an effect of the calamity. I should have never agreed to it. It was too extreme. Eris and Cordelia weren't focused on long term but I agreed anyways… I gaze from left to right, staring at the horizon. Some mountains far out in the distance. No, mountain isn't the right word. It's a crater with whatever land still left peaking up over the horizon. It happened so suddenly. The Day the Sky Fell. Nobody could decide on what to do and now here we are in this messed up, remnant of a planet, hoping we… No… Not going to think like that. It's gone. It's over. We lost. Just go home and rest.

I pull up to my house and park my bike around back. I pull my sword out of the side of the bike and slide it into a special case with the rest of my cleaning supplies. Normal looking enough.

Shooting Star/2

"Hey Morrigan? I'm back. Did you place an order already? If not, wanna get a couple pizzas?" I shout out into the foyer; I don't see her in the immediate area so maybe she's in her room or something. I take my boots off by the door and set them on the shoe rack. I set my cleaning case down next to them. I don't feel like dragging it all the way to the kitchen so I'm taking the lazy route tonight.

"Aion? Be there in a sec!" The voice shouts back, answering my call. I walk into the living room and turn the T.V. on for some background noise and then head into the kitchen. I grab a cup and pour some water into it from the pitcher, Morrigan must've prepared this ahead of time for me. Always remember to hydrate, especially after fighting bizarre… water… monster… things. Footsteps rush down the staircase into the living room.

"Hey, Aion! Welcome back!" I turn around to face her and smile.

"Yeah… hey… I'm back." I stare at her and she stares back at me. Her face instantly drops, and she rushes over to the living room for a moment.

"H-hey? What's going on Morrigan?" I ask her, sipping my water in confusion.

"You got hurt?" She grabs my hand, rushing us both to the end of the kitchen. She opens up one of the cabinets and pulls out a first aid kit.

"Stand over the sink Aion, let me clean this up." Starting the water she pulls me over. She already decided that she wasn't going to take "no" or "I'm fine" for an answer. The water and soap mix in her hands and she gently dabs my right eye to clean it, at least as best as she can. She rinses her hands and then dries them with a wash cloth, moving on to the dab the cloth over my right eyebrow to dry it up.

“Does it hurt Aion?”

“No, nah, not really. It’s not even this big a deal Morrigan, it’ll get better before you know it.” I try to keep her calm. Why am I trying to keep her calm? I’m the one who got hurt.

“You… did you guys really fight? Was what she wanted that bad? You hate them that much now Aion?” She asks, her face full of concern. Right, I suppose as far as she knows, I went to see Eris after work. I'll need to tell her about the special encounter I had on the way home.

“It was just a little spat at work. Wasn’t watching my feet. Oops! Clumsy me! Hah Hah!” I laugh nervously, that was an awful lie. Why did I lie to her? She’ll see right through it and then I’ll spill everything out to her anyways.

“You? Had a spat? And you didn’t stop time to prevent it?” She smirks at me. Playing along for once huh?

“Yeah well, you know how it is.” Morrigan digs back into the box and pulls out a bandage.

“Alright, stay still. This is gonna be a bit awkward to have on but it’s to help heal.” She fixes the bandage across my right eyebrow, pushing it down a bit to make sure it’ll really stick.

“This is gonna suck peeling off.”

“It always sucks peeling bandaids off. Is my Time Goddess afraid of losing some hair on her brow?”

“It’s gonna look weird and uneven man…”

“Oh it’ll grow back. Maybe you should’ve I don’t know, stopped time?” She smirks at me and reaches for the phone. “So…a couple of pizzas?”

“Yeah… please… long day… didn’t eat much…Would you get some hot water going too? I want some leaf juice before the pizza arrives.” I close my eyes and smile at her. It’s surprising that she didn’t press for the real answer. But maybe she already knows and is putting on a brave face for me. It is pretty likely that Eris called after I left, talking about what happened at their… club house?

Hidden Lair? Whatever that place was.

Morrigan wanders around while speaking to the restaurant and I find myself walking into the living room. I take a seat on the couch and stare blankly at the T.V. Daphne… Daphne…A trident, that's the biggest clue about her identity. The symbol of the marine deity Poseidon. Does that confirm she's from the sea? Would that explain her sinking into the ground after throwing her trident at me? Some sort of magic new based on Poseidon's teachings? No, I've never heard of anything like that before. Ceres called her a new life form. Could she be a God? If she is, why did she attack me? What's the link? If I had more clues maybe I could formulate something better but at the moment, I've got nothing. Except this cut on my face. Annoying.

Well I guess ultimately…Morrigan doesn't need to know. Would she even believe me? Hey Morrigan, this sea monster girl fought me in the middle of my ride home and had the upper hand on me the entire time.

"Hey. They said it'll be about 20 minutes." Morrigan enters the living room and sits down next to me.

"Oh! Oh cool, that's pretty quick! Not bad for a Wednesday night!" I reply cheerfully, pizza sounds so good right now.

"So uh… is there… or I mean… hehe… how was the… how DID the uh… meeting with Eris go?" Morrigan says with little confidence, her voice quieter than the news about the pizza.

"Oh, yeah so we talked for a bit and I told them I wasn't interested in whatever it was that they were doing." I answer her question, thinking back to that sad scene I saw earlier. Eris looked fine. Ceres and Cordelia have both seen better days. I guess that's the toll on their bodies. They're in much worse shape than I am. As if on cue, the needles dig back into my chest. I cross my arms and hold myself. This is more annoying now than anything. Sure it hurts but every time? So dramatic. This is where I am, this is where my life is right now. I'm arguing with my body in my head.

“Aion? Hey! Aion!” Morrigan calls out to me

“Keh!? Huh? Oh what? Did you say something Morrigan?”

“Yeah, I’ve got your tea ready!” She has me a cup by the handle. I take it from her and have a small sip for myself, testing the temperature of the drink. Ah, that’s good. Makes the day feel a little better now. Yeah, just like that the pain evaporates, until the next time rain falls on my body.

“Thanks! That’s pretty good tea Morrigan.”

“Yeah of course! I had Lilith record your exact preferences to come in handy for a rough day like this. It hasn’t been this bad since the Advent.”

“Ugh… don’t remind me. I didn’t think it could get any crazier and then another Aion shows up.” As I finish speaking, Morrigan gazes at me with wide eyes. I think she’s pretty interested in finding why a parallel version of me exists.

“Oh my god yeah! Two Aions! That was pretty wild!” Her eyes slowly grow with excitement from the conversation topic.

“What? Her charm sweep you off your feet or something Morrigan?” I curiously ask.. She fires a smile at me and takes a seat next to me on the couch. I scoot away from her, to keep some personal space.

“Are you still not… Right! Sorry! I shouldn’t have…” Morrigan apologises to me and it makes me feel bad. It's not her fault. It’s my fault.

“No it’s fine, it’s me. I’m just not… I can’t… you know.”

“Yeah…” The brightness fades from Morrigan’s voice. She looks forward at the television. I’ve created this awkward situation. Goodness. I shouldn’t have reacted like that. She just sat a little closer to me. Why am I like this? Why do I continue to make things weird between us. My heart sinks into my stomach, I feel awful. Ugh why why why… My eyes peek to the side, seeing how much more space I created between Her and I. Even after all we’ve done, I’m still afraid. Man, I

already, we were already close. She just bandaged my eye. Damn can I just, not be like me for once?

Pin Pon

"OH!"

"OH!"

We shout simultaneously. Delivery guy you are a life saver!

"I'll go get it Aion! Just stay here!" Morrigan leaps off of the couch and heads over to the door. Haha wow. I can't believe how much of a relief that doorbell was.

"Okay, I hope you're hungry! A couple pizzas should do us both some good!" Enthusiastically, Morrigan takes the pizzas into the kitchen. I hadn't thought about having more than one. That's for dinner and lunch tomorrow! I take another sip of tea; it's cooled down a bit. Hmm, I should get another cup.

"Hey Morrigan, is there still hot water?" I shout. Why did I shout? I should just go to the kitchen and ask her. Turning the T.V. off, I get up and make my way over.

"Yeah there's still some in the kettle. It's on the stove." She responds as I enter the kitchen.

"Doesn't it smell good Aion?" She holds the box open towards me.

"Yeah! Give me a couple slices will ya?" I set my cup to the side and grab a couple plates from the cabinet. I set them down for the both of us and Morrigan sets the slices on top.

"Here's some pepperoni, can't go wrong with the pepperoni!" She giggles under her breath.

"Indeed, you couldn't do wrong with a couple of nice, hot slices of pepperoni pizza." I reply with my own cheesy little pitch. I look around and find that the bottle of soda is suspiciously absent this time. Did the delivery guy forget about it?

"No soda for our little freeloader?" I ask Morrigan before digging into the pizza.

"Oh, no. She didn't stop by today. I was thinking of having some leaf juice with you. If you don't mind."

“Ah, not at all. Feel free to have as much as you want. I think I can afford to give you a bit of my personal supply.”

“Oho! Personal tea! I’m super honoured Aion. Haha.” She and I laugh at the comment, and we get down to eating and chatting about various things during the day.

“What about your sis? She not here today either?”

“Oh she's here. Lilith has mostly been resting though. She’s not receiving as much mana and you know, being up drains her more than not. If I need her she can assume form as my familiar I suppose.” I know I’m only delaying the inevitable conversation, until Morrigan decides to hit me with the question I’ve been awaiting all evening. We return to the living room and resettle.

“Well, I'm glad to have her around. We should save a few slices for her. She'll probably be hungry when she wakes up.” She nods at me and goes back to eating her pizza. I take another bite and stare blankly at the television.

“So, the cut, how’d you get it Aion.”

“My eyebrow, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Well…it all began…when I was born.” I smirk at her and laugh a little.

“Oh dear, Aion please.”

“Ok ok. Well, I was heading over to see Eris after work and something… attacked me.”

“Something spooky? Like a ghost? Or a phantom? Or a big monster with giant teeth? Or is this like a mental monster that been sitting in your mind since you were born and reminded you of the cold, crushing brutality of the universe and made you question why we even survived to see this future in the first place so it side tracked you while you were driving and you weren’t paying attention so you crashed into a rock and flew off your bike and you couldn’t freeze time quick enough and scrapped your eyebrow over a particularly nasty rock that slit your face open and spilled your blood?”

“Morrigan… What the hell?”

“Sorry, just thinking out-loud. Also you did say it all began when you were born! I was simply designing the trauma that such an occasion could encompass!” I stare at her in disbelief, hoping I’m still talking to the same person that put this bandage on me. The T.V. catches my attention again. An ad is playing a dramatic lover's quarrel or something for this play that's running at the Theatre Arts Centre. I feel like I’ve heard it a million times so now it’s kinda growing on me.

“It's what you do best right? Leaving me alone after hurting me.”

“I'm going to leave you alone because I can't be the person you can trust and rely on.

Sorry, I’m really the worst partner you could have.”

“I don't know if that's true but please stop trying to prove it to me.” “…”

The commercial ends. I return my focus to Morrigan, she’s watching intently. I guess I should explain what happened. She’ll understand. We can talk to each other. This is why we split from the others. Plus it does concern all Ministry members. If that monster girls returns and comes for Morrigan, it would be bad news. She can’t support herself anymore. I might not be there to protect her. The idea fills me with dread.

“Aion?” Morrigan takes my hands in hers and smiles. She’s so soft…Uhgh wahd kaw fwuah hah gwa! N-not like me!

“Sorry, maybe it was a monster in my mind, and I fell off my bike. Maybe I died there, and this is a projection of my spirit…”

“Hah hah hah.” She’s laughing at me…

“Ok fine. You don’t need to laugh at me. I’ll tell you. No more stalling.”

“Hah hah… Aion I’m not laughing at you. I thought the joke was funny! I’m laughing at the joke I swear!” Morrigan grips my hands tighter and smiles at me. It’s so warm. Heh...dumb crow…

“Well on the way to Aulis, I was attacked by a trident wielding maniac who could turn into water

and after she got this hit in on me… she smirked at me and then… melted… into the ground."

"Bwahahaha! Ok what?"

"You are laughing at me!" I pull my hands away from her and throw them around myself. "This is why I was avoiding it!" Why am I behaving like this…she's my friend and I'm acting like a fool.

"No, no Aion… I'm not laughing at you! Really! I was just laughing. I don't know. I just do it sometimes that's all. Sorry if I made you feel bad. So please, tell me more." She stares into my eyes. I guess I overreacted. I can't believe that even after all the time we've spent together… I'm no longer comfortable around her. Sorry Morrigan.

"Do you think she's related to that person? The raven haired girl in the trench coat?" Morrigan turns away from me, staring at the T.V. instead.

"Oh, the one who showed up after the Advent? I…I don't know if they're related. We never learned anything about her. I didn't learn anything about the girl from earlier. I didn't learn anything. I never learn anything. It's pathetic right? Why am I such a failure?" Clenching my fists I get up to head to my room.

"Sorry Morrigan. I'm just… I need some time."

"Ah! A-alright. I'll see you tomorrow then." She says with her voice low, her head dejected. I just need some me time Morrigan, I don't mean anything rude by it.

"H-hey…" I quietly call out to her. "See you later…"

I rush into the foyer and take the stairs up to my room. Down the long hall to the left is my room. Morrigan is on the opposite end. I left that awkwardly and I probably looked so upset to Morrigan. I'm not upset. I'm frustrated at myself. I'm tired of being a failure. I couldn't stop the Advent. I couldn't go back and fix things. The future just refused to change. No matter what I did, I kept coming back to our messed-up timeline and now I can't even control the flow of time as well as before. At least the pain in my body has calmed down. Now I can wallow in self-pity without

having to worry others about my failing body.

Opening my bedroom door I'm greeted by my most favourite view in the entire universe. My big comfy bed. You'll never betray me. You'll always gently deliver me to sleep and keep me safe and secure during the night. I walk towards my bed and begin to pull back on my weighted blanket before my mind stops me. Hey! You haven't showered yet! Clean up first!

I grab my nightwear, a towel and travel over to the bathroom. It's down the hall, in between our rooms. God why did I leave like that? I don't know if she headed to her room too or is just watching T.V. or maybe cleaning up the kitchen.

I knock on the door to see if maybe she had come in here.

Knock Knock

…

No response. I guess I'm free to enter. I look down on the first floor to peek for her.

Nope, nothing.

I open the door up to the empty room and hang my towel on the handle of the shower door. Getting the water started, I wait for it to warm up while undressing. I'm tired. I'm actually really tired…What a day. All this and it's only been a single day.

Watson… Watson… What… or rather… who is this Watson? The monster is looking for a Watson. Maybe she should've tried Baker Street. Pulling off my top and unhooking my bra, my mind is plagued by questions. Dropping the clothes into the hamper, I try to think of a link. Any link to anything! How are these two related? Where would I even start to find out more info?

Can I even find more info? Maybe if I could go back I'd be able to see that girl in the trench coat again. I could act the scene out in a different way.

Tch, that weirdo earlier got lucky. See me before my shift not after. I'll definitely win. Did the end of days awaken her? Is she our enemy? Or are they mysterious creatures hidden in a different

plane of existence? Do they only appear when life of the planet and the stability of time and space are threatened? Pulling my skirt and underwear down, I drop them on top of my shirt and prepare to enter the shower. Man, I don't know. I want to find out though.

I might… have to work with those *three* again. Before I get to step inside, a noise shakes me to my very core.

Knock Knock

"Wh-what is it?!" I shout.

"H-hey Aion? Are you in there?" The voice beyond the door calls out. I try to calm myself. Why did that freak me out so much? It's just Morrigan.

"HEY! Yeah I'm about to shower. Did you need something? Is it urgent?" I'm sort of in a compromising position at the moment. Please let it be something I can take care of afterwards Morrigan…

"Oh you're about to shower? Sorry, I didn't hear the water running. I'll come back after you finish then!" She walks away from the door, and I assume to her room. Phew. I actually forgot to lock the door. How nice. She knocked first, never even tried to enter. I find myself smiling as I step inside and begin to wash up. Humming while having a daydream under the water. Or is it a night dream now? Wouldn't that just be a normal dream? I don't know but this is a mood booster. I feel better with the hot water hitting me. Super thankful for Morrigan's records of history, helping keep us in the modern age rather than the stone age. She's the Goddess of War and now Time apparently. I close my eyes and continue my cleaning, sending the night off on a comfortable foot.

Incarnation of Pessimism/3

“You’re afraid to live.”

“And you’re afraid to die.”

“What a way to let things end.”

These words repeat in my dreams every night. Am I the one saying them? I can’t remember. All I remember is standing right on the edge of the end.

“Ahem… Am I boring you, Aion?” Ceres says in her ever so gentle voice. She caught me; I was zoning out a bit.

“No, I just have a lot on my mind. Please, continue, Ceres.” I extend my hand out to her, hoping she'll continue.

“I’ll just get to the point then, since it appears your attention is already elsewhere. You two have two objectives. One, reach the crater and look for signs of any and all-time abnormalities. Two, enter the crater and recover Eris’s box. Am I clear, Aions?”

“Ah, right, technically, only one of us is a Aion. You know, when we get back, I could help teach you the difference. Cordelia too.” He wanders over to Ceres and smiles. Trying that on her like this is wild.

“I don’t recall asking, nor am I interested in whatever you said instead of answering. We have created a map of sorts to lead you both to the location of the box. You don’t need to work together but your chances of success increase if you do.” Ceres puts the maps in Chrono’s hand and then shoos him away, prompting him to walk back to where he was. He stands next to me with his head hanging dejected. There's a time and place for these things man.

“Miss every shot you don’t take, am I right?” He looks over at me with a smirk on his face.

Whatever man, nobody asked you to come back, you just showed up. Don't go flirting with them, it's weird.

He hands me the map. Looks like this box is right in the centre of the crater. Why didn't she just tell us it's in the centre? Did this really need a map? Whatever. I put it into my jacket's pocket.

"Hey! Do you think I want to be compared to a loser like you, Chrono?" I fire back at him.

"Oof, my heart Aion! Ruthless. Absolute dreadful camaraderie we've got going on here." He digs into his coat pocket and pulls out a pack of cigarettes.

"Outside please." Ceres says gently then turns away, heading into the room next door. Guess that's our hint to leave. Stopping just before the door, she turns her head around toward us. "And again, just out of caution, do not, I repeat, do not, look back when you exit the crater." Chrono inhales his smoke and blows it out into the room. He lifts the cigarette away from his lips and lets out a hearty chuckle.

"Don't look back. Right. Thank you kindly for the reminder!" He puts the cigarette back into his mouth and Ceres stares a thousand knives in his direction. How we're the same origin, I'll never be able to wrap my head around.

"Let's just go. I don't want to spend all day with you doing…" I let my words end prematurely. I don't really think I need to explain this to him. I rub my left thigh, the sensation of pain has spread. But that means I'm still alive right? Should I be wasting what time I have left on this?

We exit the building and head down the steps to our vehicles. The clouds are crowding the skies today. If I didn't know any better, I'd say this is a very bad sign from the universe. On the other hand, it means Ceres has brought some life back into nature.

"Why were you so late?" I ask him while looking down at his car. There's a dorky looking guy standing next to it. In fact, how did Chrono even get this car?

"My driver got lost. It's not a big deal Aion." He finishes his cigarette and drops it, stepping on it

to put it's final embers of life out.

"Find some poor sucker in town to drive you around huh?" I stare at Chrono shaking my head. He smirks at me and signals to the guy they're moving.

"Start her up Watson, we're heading out." THAT NAME! WATSON!

"Watson? Did… you call him Watson… Chrono?"

"Yeah, that's my p-" I run up to the mysterious guy and grab him by his shirt collar. I grip him as tight as my body will let me.

"Who the FUCK are you? How did you get here? SPEAK!" I shout at him. I pull him closer to me, staring straight into his eyes. His eyes shift away for a moment, he's hiding something. He has Chrono fooled. Ugh… fucking Chrono. I'll give you a piece of my mind later.

"You! Watson! You won't leave this place alive if you don't start speaking!" I let go of his collar and grab his neck. Chrono runs over to me, putting his hands on my arm.

"Whoa. Hey, Aion. Relax! Calm down!" I strengthen my grip around him. I can hear the air struggle to escape his throat.

"Who! Are! You!?" Answer me!"

I feel time pause. Chrono places his hands on mine.

"Let go of me Chrono. I've been looking for someone named Watson! They were there that day…" He interrupts me, keeping his hands gripped to mine.

"Aion for fuck sake, he came over with me! This is the first time he's traveled here. I swear it to you."

"Bullshit Chrono, I saw this person…this…they were there the day of the calamity! Watson!"

"How on Earth do you know he was there Aion? Do enlighten me."

"He… the monster. The thing that attacked me! It was looking for someone named Watson!"

"Oh yeah? And did this monster kindly leave a description of my partner? Who I might remind

you… has your hands around his neck?"

I loosen my grip and take a step back. I take a better look at Chrono's partner. Gross moustache, seriously outdated uniform. This isn't a suit. It's a cowboy outfit. With a man inside. A grown man playing cowboy. He's wearing a duster. I take another step back and Chrono lets go of me. Time resumes and his is partner is none the wiser to what just occurred. Although, he is trying to catch his breath now.

"See, Aion. This isn't whoever you're looking for. He's my partner. Vetted him myself!"

"I don't think that counts for much Chrono. Anyways, sorry, I got caught up in the moment."

"Oh yeah, I mean it's no problem, dude. I just need a sec." Watson replies. He leans against the car door. His chest rising and falling with each breath he takes.

"You don't ever lighten up, do you?" Chrono says. I glare at him. Maybe he should've been my target for strangling instead…

"You'd attract a lot more guys if you dropped that nasty attitude of yours." I walk over to my bike, biting my tongue. I get on and stare at them both.

"Just go! I'll see you guys there ok?" Chrono waves at me and then turns his attention to Watson. He bumps his shoulder and opens the door for him.

"Yeah sure. Try not killing my partner there either. You'll come to appreciate him! I promise!" I stare at Chrono in silence. His big dumb grin on his big dumb face. God, I hate you.

"Alright buddy, the crater area ok? Or do you want me to drive."

"Aw shucks Chrono, it weren't nothin'. I'm fine. I want to drive." He dusts himself off and takes the keys out of his pocket. The car's interior is pretty fancy, from what I can see at least. Chrono's style no doubt. I guess I wouldn't mind having that for myself.

"Alright, take the wheel. I'll be planning out our COA (Course of Action) then. See you there Aion." Chrono heads to the passenger side and gets in. Watson stares at me for a moment before

getting in himself.

"It is nice to meet you Miss. Aion. I'm Watson. Cassidy Watson, Detective Extraordinaire, at your service." He bows to me and then enters the car. Another weirdo is here. Whatever, I just need to get the job done today. Eris's box. What is so important about that box? Why doesn't she just go get it herself?

Chrono lights up another cigarette and blows out the smoke in various shapes. How out of style can two people be?

"So, I'll just see you up there yeah?" He shouts through the open window.

"Yeah. Don't wait on my account man. Just do whatever." I wave goodbye towards him and start my bike up. I didn't get to see his weapon. Does he think he won't need it? I wonder, would an alternate version of me have a different weapon? Maybe guns? A different type of sword? Maybe they fight with their bare hands. Heh, that's a sight I'd like to see. Chrono getting beat up by a better fighter. I'd pay to see that perfect face crushed!

I watch them vanish into the horizon. He's somewhat reliable. He returned after all. If he and his group can manage that, they might be able to fix this whole dying universe ordeal. I hate to admit it but, he's our best option at the moment. I start my bike up and look back up at the building. Odd that Eris wasn't here today. She would've fangirled so hard over that idiot. I check my phone and notice a few messages from Morrigan.

"Hey how's the meeting going? Everything alright? 😁"

"I'm going to reheat the pizza tonight so don't worry about picking anything up! 😎"

"I'm not worried but I am worried. Be safe ok? 😣"

"Yeah. I'll be fine. See you later. 🙂

"Wooooooooowwww. Aion using emoji…it truly is the end of days lmao. 🥵🥵🔥"

“Shut up! I’ll be back later! 😏”

“Ok bye then”

“Hey…”

“Yeah?”

“I well I wanted to say…y’know.”

“You wanted to say???”

“You know!”

“I don’t know Aion. Please. Tell me 🥺”

“<”

“3”

“💕”

“💞💘🥰”

“I love you.”

“I love you too, Aion. Please come back safe.”

I take off in the dust trail Chrono had so kindly left behind for me. I don’t know what to do when we get there. Well, he’ll take care of the logistics. I’m just support. Nothing wrong with taking the backseat on this. Plus he brought his partner. He probably wants all the glory for solving our problems. I don’t care. Makes my job easier. Maybe he can fill in as my replacement. Him and that partner of his. I can just live my days out with Morg. That would be nice. Now that I think about it, my body hasn’t ached as much as it usually does today. No pain. No uncomfortable shifting around in place trying to hide it. Maybe things will get better.

Aion in the Underworld/4

"Done flirting with your boy toy?" I ask. He steps away from Watson, shaking his head.

We exit our vehicles and walk towards the edge of the crater. We step inside and slide down the outer rim to the inner part. It's kind of like hiking down a hill. A messed up hill made by an explosion.

"What on Earth are you saying?" He responds as we slide down to the bottom. We find ourselves on the remnants of a road. It's full of destroyed, empty vehicles and silence. We travel along the lonesome path, giving it some much needed company. I turn my head around, looking at an old building that sits off on the side of the road further down from us. Remarkably intact but abandoned nonetheless.

"I mean… You guys just kinda look like a thing." I reply. Our walk continues. It's so eerie. Remnants of life still persist like buildings and cars but there's a definite lack of nature here. No birds chirping. No wind blowing. No trees growing. It's off-putting. A complete lack of Ceres' touch.

"A thing? Like we're dating? That kind of thing?"

"No a thing like… from outer space. Idiot." I stick my tongue out at him, taunting him.

The city in the centre of the crater continues the remarkable emptiness. It's nothing more than an abandoned city now, which is to be expected. Our footsteps echo, bouncing between the hollow buildings. The sound carries through the alleys and streets, if any bits of life are still around, it would be aware of our presence now. The depressing, greyscale world that surrounds us gives me an odd sensation of sensory overload. Usually too many colours or bright lights do it, but this place? It's as if the world is muted. It's dreadful to be in. Maybe it's so depressing it's negatively affecting

me.

“Is that because my beauty is out of this world?” I stop walking and stare at him. No way he just said something like that.

“Hahaha, I assure you, we are not a thing. There is nothing between either of us or from outer space. He’s my partner and I’m his.” Chrono continues his thoughts.

I raise an eyebrow and smirk. “Oh, you’re his partner? And he’s yours?”

“Ugh, you are most certainly the same annoying brat as before. What did I do to deserve this? Something a millennium or so ago. Perhaps even a past life. An unjust punishment laboured upon me for upsetting Jove.” Chrono places his face into his right palm, letting out a sigh. His hand moves up towards his hair and he brushes it back.

“You are so dramatic. It’s a joke man. Lighten up.” I bump his left shoulder with my right, letting my laughter get the best of me.

“Hah hah. Aion. Truly the Queen of Comforts and Delights. To ensure your evenings are smooth sailing, hire her today!” He sticks his tongue out and me and we both laugh. My sight return to the soulless town. Devoid of people it’s become nothing more than ruins. Monuments to mankind’s achievements continue to ring hollow with each step forward. I look back at our path traveled so far. It’s lonely. That’s what it is. Soul crushing loneliness grips this space without relent. As if nature itself already has given its final breath and fell to the sands of… time.

“Hey, Aion. I think we’re coming up on the uh… box? Thing? Whatever it was Ceres and Cordelia wanted us to find.”

“The box? We’re coming up on it? Like it’s over the horizon ahaha.” I stare at him, holding little back of my laughter.

“Hilarious. Well, there’s a big red box down the road. It’s the only thing that stands out. What else could it be if not that big red box Aion?” He shrugs his shoulders and begins to jog up to the

box.

I don't doubt him. It's the first thing with colour in the entire crater. It's hard to believe it's even real. After seeing so much dulled out colour. All of these shades of grey, the longer we stay the more sick I'm going to feel. Guess I should catch up to him.

"Hey, don't just grab it idiot!" I shout at him. He's made it to the box and is crouching down and poking it.

"What if it's a trap or something comes out of it or it's cursed?" I ask him with my own curiosity boiling up as I approach the box.

"Your friends would make you pick up a horrible box like that?" He responds as he stops his poking and looks up at me.

"Eris is Chaos. What do you think is gonna happen if you don't exercise proper care?" Tapping the box with my foot I stare down at Chrono. He has a grin painted on his face but nods at me and picks himself up.

"So, what? Is this Pandora's Box or something? We open it up and the world ends yeah?" He remarks with his grin further growing from ear to ear. It makes his face twice as punchable.

"Look around you, the world already ended. All of the evil left that thing long ago. I'm just saying you might damage that pretty face of yours something." I turn my head left and right, looking around at the empty area. This box being out here in the middle of the street is the definition of suspicious.

"Well, if the world already ended then what's the harm in opening this up? This thing isn't even a box. It's more like a briefcase. Is this really what we needed to find? You're her friend, is this something she had used before?" He smiles at me and taps the box again.

"I don't know. We… don't talk much anymore. They just asked for it back so you and I just need to bring it back. Don't make it complicated. We don't have that much time left." I roll my eyes and

reach down towards it, pulling it back up with me by its handle. This thing isn't locked. The latches aren't pushed in. Is that on purpose or… Actually, forget it. We have it, lets just go.

"Alright, fine. I guess that's that then, right? Nothing bad happened. The box is secured. Easiest trip of my life." Chrono says. He laughs and starts walking back up the path we came from. I stare into the empty street that was ahead of us and down at the "box" in my left hand. Well, that is that I guess.

"Hey!" I shout at him. "Make sure you don't turn around. Since we're going back we can't look backwards."

"Oh right, thanks for the heads-up doll!" He pulls out a cigarette and lights it up. I look down and then turn towards him, no turning back now.

My steps follow Chrono's, the silent town sees the sun hide beyond the horizon now. Our light is on its own time limit for the return journey. The long, hollow shadows of the buildings around us cast themselves. I'd prefer to get back home before night falls. That's bringing our second day to an end. We only have two more days to fix things. This box better have some answers.

"We're almost out! I can see Cassidy's figure in the distance!" Chrono shouts. He's careful to keep his gaze still forward, fearful of the warning we were given. When a God tells another God to do something, it's something they should heed.

"Great! Now we can go back and talk about how this was a massive waste of time!" I shout back at him. There was nothing down here, just the ruined Earth from Cordelia's attack. Barren of life, the haunting images of empty buildings, parks, schools. Nothing notable or worth reporting back. What did they even send us here for?

"Hey, wanna stop for a drink before returning to your old buddies?" Chrono shouts out again, guess he's just as bored. We walk past the intact but dilapidated building we first crossed when we arrived. I wonder how many people went in and out of there for their day to day lives. I wonder how

many survived...

“They’re not my buddies. Just return the damn box so I can go home!” I answer annoyed. Why are we here? Why did Chrono come? Why did I agree to it? I should just reset time on this whole day and stay home with Morrigan…

“My apologies, Madame! No need for any additional aggression!” His laughter trails off as we approach the border to get back to the top of the crater. Now I can see his partner show up on the horizon. We should’ve just taken his car down. Wouldn’t have wasted so much time.

“Hey how much walking do you think we have left; my legs are starting to ache.” I’m not really aching, I just wanted to have some sort of noise to push the silence away.

“Oh, I’d wager…five or so kilometres left. Not bad considering we trekked that whole city already!” He’s proud of walking that much. Probably going to take this back to his friends as a story he can brag about. *“Oh, hey look at me I’m Chrono. I got to spend the whole day with a super-hot chick.”* Why does being around him infuriate me so much?

“AION!” A voice shouts from out of nowhere.

“What? What was that Aion?” Chrono stops in place while shouting.

“I… I don’t know? How the hell would I know you idiot?” I shout back angrily. Don’t ask me stupid questions like that!

“Aion please… I… I need… ” The mysterious voice shouts again. Wait… that’s… no… What? It couldn’t be!

“H-Hey! Wh-where are you? Morrigan!?” I yell in a panic.

“Morrigan? What the hell, Aion? There's no Morrigan here.”

“She shouldn’t be here but that was her voice! I know it was.”

“Oh for the love of…Aion be realistic here! Why would she be out here?”

“I don’t know! But I can't just ignore it!” My eyes slide from left to right. I’m deathly tempted to

turn around.

“Aion! Don’t you dare. We'll look around after exiting this God forsaken area! Don’t do it now! You can’t turn around!”

“Fucking hell. I know you’re right! But I have to know. I need to confirm it!” I take a step back.

Chrono starts walking backwards towards me until he stands right in front of me. He keeps his body forward then steps to the right of me. I can feel his sharp, determined gaze on me.

“Not now Aion. Go on then. Move.” He demands of me.

“Fuck off Chrono. I can't lose her. I can't.”

“Aion, this isn’t the time to bicker, we don’t know what or who is out here. I’m not jeopardising our mission because of a single voice that decided to play games with us as we approach the exit. Think about it! It’s a trap!”

“Oh please. A cool guy like you shaking in his boots because he can’t turn around? Get real!”

“Aion we went the ENTIRE day without seeing or hearing a thing. Now this happens! Be realistic! Whatever it is obviously wants to trick you. It’s the biggest cliché in existence!”

“Yeah well, now something is happening! And you want to leave as soon as it happens?”

“Aion!” He shouts my name. I ignore him and slowly turn around.

“Aion no!”

“***Aion yes!***”

In an instant, I see something dash towards us. No, more like, flying towards us. Low to the ground. It’s black… kinda… red… purplish… Horns. Long hair flows at its back. Looks female. Is she a monster? A demon?

“You should’ve listed to your boyfriend there sweetie! Sorry to say there’s no Eurydice here but you’ve made the last mistake of your life!” It flies straight at me and grabs me by the shoulders, dragging me away from Chrono.

"Ugh, dammit Aion! Just hold on! I'll… I'll get you!" Chrono turns around for me.

"Don't worry about me! Just get yourself to a safe place! I'll meet back up with you later" I shout at him.

I'm sure he caught what I said despite the growing distance between us. It looks like this creature is carrying me back down the path we came. Perhaps to the old building we passed up not too long ago. I had a feeling there was something off about that place. It's too pristine to be out here.

"Yeah, don't worry. She's property of Hell now!" The mysterious stranger shouts as she pulls on me. I'll go along with this ride for a bit. I'm not leaving this place without any clues.

Sprinting as fast as he can, Chrono returns to Cassidy. His breaths are heavy, laboured, pained and his ever strong, determined voice is shaky and crackly.

"Hey! Hey! Hey. Cass! We gotta! Cassidy!"

"Dude, Chrono… one thing at a time man."

"Did… did you see it? The thing? The ugh… "

"Take a deep breath. See what? Where's Aion?"

"Ok… ok you didn't. Then… whatever. Cassidy!"

"What?!"

"You need to Chronoshift in there! Aion… that idiot looked back and got dragged away by something."

"I can't do that dude." Cassidy stares into the space of the crater.

"What?! What do you mean you can't do it. I gave you an order!"

"Look, Chrono, this place man… It's different. I can't do it. Not in there at least."

"Wh-well why on Earth not man!"

"Because… " Sticking his arm into the crater area with a pocket watch in hand, he takes a deep breath and stares at me. Inside the crater the hands of the watch stops moving.

"Is… is this… Time… it's… "

“Yeah dude. Time is frozen in here. Or maybe… time doesn’t exist here.”

“A-and you didn’t tell us?”

“Well, I thought you guys would’ve noticed. Your both Time Gods or whatever right?” We…I didn’t… I don’t think Aion noticed either?! How… did we both miss that?! What the hell? It was the first thing Ceres tasked us with. We messed up.

“And… when did you notice?” I ask him.

“I don’t know…an hour or so ago. I just was practising some poses and stuff and I accidentally fell down the hill into the crater.”

“You fell in? C’mon man! Ok, continue.”

“Yeah man… I felt time stop… Or not really stop I felt the absence of time. It… whatever this place is Chrono, it’s not good.”

“Time isn’t recorded in here? Is that a fair deduction Watson?”

“Yeah, about as good as we can get without going back inside. Should we?”

“No… no… I was in there all day and didn’t notice a thing. Going back with that knowledge won’t change it. Tell me more, what do you think?”

“Well, like I said, time isn’t in this area. I’d guess that it probably isn’t natural to this world… probably isn’t even natural to this universe. It’s like it was dropped off here or something.”

“So, you think someone may have been put here?”

“You can go along that line of thinking. We can’t confirm or deny it yet.”

“And so in this place, time is nonexistent?”

“Correct. There is no flow of time here. Forward or backward.”

“I see. Thank you Watson.”

“What are you thinking about Chrono? What’s going through your head right now?”

“If time doesn’t flow here, either time doesn’t exist yet, or time ended.”

“Time doesn’t exist… or it ended… ” Cassidy repeats my words with his right hand on his chin.

“If the first is the case, then this might just be an anomaly that we’d normally solve.”

“And if it’s the latter?”

“Then this place was made by someone. Someone far more powerful than both Aion and I.”

“Made? So someone brought this chunk of land and just put it here?”

“It has to be from the End of Time.”

“What does that mean Chrono?” Cassidy scratches his moustache and wiggles his nose.

“It means only another Time God could’ve done this. One with complete mastery over their ability. If this is from the End of Time then we’re in trouble.”

“Wh-what is it?” Cassidy asks, his expression slowly getting more and more fearful.

“This is a Cosmic Egg, and an amazing one at that. The God responsible for this hasn’t been seen in a very, long time. They vanished long ago, after the End of the last cycle.”

“The End Of Time? From the last cycle?”

“Yeah, yeah. The end of reality itself. This shouldn’t exist. This mystery just became much more dreadful Watson. If I didn’t notice the change inside then I’m intrinsically related to whomever had created it. The same goes for Aion.”

“So, what are we going to do? Wait for Aion?”

“Yeah, I’ll wait for her. You go back to town, get some food, drinks, first aid supplies, a blanket, get anything and everything. We might be here for a while. Take the car and use as much money as you need. My wallet is in the car.”

“Ok Chrono. Stay safe man. I can’t lose you. The Ministry would have my ass…”

“I’ll be fine. Just get the stuff and come back safe yourself kid.

“R-right, I’m on it.” Cassidy walks over to the car and get in. He starts it up, waves at me and then drives off.

"Another me version of me. Are they an Aion or a Chrono though? And… such a devious little creation they've made. Who are you stranger? Why this world? And why us? Are we threats? Or are we allies? Ugh Aion, you idiot. Come back soon."

Girls Night Out/5

I stare at the shrinking landscape, watching Chrono's car speed off somewhere while someone remains at the edge of the rim. My clothes scrape and scrap against the road, I'm not too worried about my situation though. I haven't lost a fight in a thousand years; I don't plan on losing on here. That weirdo yesterday didn't count, it wasn't a fair fight. I dig my heels into the ground, slowing the demon down.

"Ugh. Unruly, bratty child. You are reckoning with someone far beyond your expertise." She tightens her grip on my shoulders and pulls me upward. I guess she wants to further display that brute strength she has. She's already dragging me after all. Her arms grip me and she lifts me over her head. I think she's trying to throw me. Another weirdo… We're finally at that old building. I guess she wants to bring me inside.

Snapping my fingers, I take the reins of time into my hand once more. I hop out of her grip and walk into the shadow of the building. Being here confirms it's special. Or it's just the closest place to hide? Well, I'll give it a look after taking care of this weirdo. I snap my fingers again and watch her panic as she realises I'm no longer her prisoner.

"You! How? You weren't supposed to be able to control the flow here! She lied! LIED TO US!" The demon cries as she charges at me. She's fast. Impressive. I take the flow back in between my fingers, stepping safely to the side to avoid her. Pulling my magical blade from my back, I slam the handle into her face and let the flow resume. She flies into the wall on the other side of the building, crashing outside of it. She leaps up and stares at the broken wall. Well, she's got spirit. She's rubbing her face a lot. Guess the backside of my sword hurts almost as much as the opposite end.

"I will unfold you! Unwind your mind! Your Soul! Till you shatter! Like GLASS!" Her voice

shrieks out. Guess she didn't like that. Try not telegraphing such a simple attack then.

She pushes her hands forward and orbs of shadow leave her palms. They fly through the destroyed wall towards me. I guess I shouldn't let those touch me. Side stepping them in my frozen world, I look on at the figure. Her attacks so far are straight forward, obvious, and easy to dodge. Now that I get a decent look at her, she looks like Cassie. Well, like an inverted version of her. Is this an outfit or something? An out of season joke? Is she messing with me?

"Hey! What's your name?" I shout out to her. Maybe this is just a misunderstanding? But she's never been like this before. It could be a completely different person or rather, angel.

"I have no name." Her reply was remarkably less heated than the previous engagements we've had.

"Alright no name. Why are you here?"

"I don't need to tell you." She replies. Expected…

"Can I just go home? I'm kind of looking forward to dinner with my crow."

"W-with your what?!" Ahaha perfect. She's off her guard now.

"Yeah she's kinda like… my roommate and my f-friend but you know we had some pizza and soda… " Ok looks like she's still listening to me. No need for soul rending, please just let me go home man…

"P-pizza and soda? With an CROW? Isn't that dangerous?" Her voice sounds more and more perplexed, this is great. Slowly I start walking towards her, continuing my talking technique.

"It's fine. She's pretty independent though. Does a lot on her own. Let's me do my thing. It's a good relationship." It… it is a good relationship. I was being weird with her the other night. Now I feel a bad. Maybe when I get back I'll snuggle up to her on the couch. That sounds nice… ah I'm losing focus. I need to get back on track.

"A relationship… with your crow? Do you have any idea how ridiculous that sounds?

Bwahahahaha" She turns her head upwards, continuing her hysterical laughter. I keep my approach slow and subtle; I don't need to distract her much more. Just a bit closer and I'll knock her out and head home.

"Oh yeah! I mean sure it's a little unconventional but hey… sometimes it just works." I crack the knuckles on my left hand and get ready to spring the final stretch of my plan into action.

"And you have pizza AND soda, For an crow. I thought birds weren't supposed to have carbonated drinks because they can't get rid of the excess gas. In which case you would be a rather irresponsible partner. What do you have to respond with?!" She shouts out at me before realising how close I've gotten to her. Her eyes widen, taking up all of the space on her face. She has heterochromia, just like Cassie. Sorry doppelgänger, you'll probably need to ice this for a week or so.

"Well, she still welcomes me home, even after everything that's happened so far." I freeze time. Hopefully that's the last time I need to. I lay a punch into her face, hitting her as hard as I can. And I do it again and again and again. I let time resume and watch her fly off. She never saw it coming, I almost feel bad… almost.

"Hey! You done? You gonna get back up?" I shout at her, watching carefully for any signs of movement. She might actually be down for the count. Hmm, should I take her back with me or just leave her here? She might be useful to the others. As I cautiously approach the "demon" girl, I let my sword magically fizzle away and gaze around the area. I should remain cautious, she could be faking it. In fact, this is the whole nature of the situation I'm in. I could be falling for another trap like earlier. Whether or not she's knocked out isn't even the whole issue here, there could be something hiding in the dark, waiting for me.

"Whatever, you weren't worth the time or effort. I'm going back home. If you can hear me, don't mess with any of us again." I turn around and head towards the shattered of the building.

Fortunately, this place didn't fall apart. I wonder if Chrono and that kid are still waiting for me. Maybe those two went to the girls to ask for help. Would those three even help me? Who knows? I have some leftover pizza with Morrigan to look forward to. This will make a neat story too…

Snap

I instantly turn around to the location of the sound. N-no way…What the fuck? I- impossible! The figure standing in the middle of the building! It's… it's… it's her!

"Oh, she really was no match for you. I thought maybe with her hatred and despair she'd do something… but as a catalyst? What of those virtues my angel? Worthless." The figure standing in front of me is radiant. A true Goddess. She's standing silent, waiting for a response. For acknowledgment. But she left so long ago. This has to be more trickery.

"What is this? A family reunion? This is getting ridiculous man." I sigh, staring at the figure. Maybe it's some new form of magic. It is kinda chaotic and Eris is missing…

"Reunion? Oh no, you have the wrong idea here. You're no family of mine. You're a knock-off. Means to an end. You will simply bring me to the original." The figure exclaims. A fake Cassiel and now me? Whatever, I'm not going to just give up. Something inside me is getting really irritated by this.

"Me? A fake? You've got the wrong room sister. The costume party is two doors down! My sister would never waste her time on something like this!" I summon my sword again and point it towards the creature that appears as my older sister.

"Oh you. Never even found the second half to the blade. How did you end up such a failure? You are really this pathetic… But it's really my fault. I suppose even I make mistakes from time to time…"

"S-second half? Wh-what? How do you know that?"

"What's the point in telling you? I'm calling up the lease on your life. You weren't completely

useless… But you have served your purpose. You may die now!" At the end of her words, time speeds up at her call. She's good. Not a single indicator of her needing any sort of technique to control the flow of time. Well that doesn't matter, just focus on her. She looks like *her* so she probably fights like *her*. You know what she'll do, and she knows what you'll do. Just wait… be patient and…

"DIE!" She screams out as she pulls right up to my face. I never even noticed her! When did she? I was just watching her to the left as…

"You forget your masters training. Only to pause and resume, how primitive you've become. I think it's easier to just remove time. Take it out of the equation all together. You can't see something happening if it never happens, Aion."

Two swords dig deep into my stomach. There was no instance of time where this event occurred. She placed the killing blow on me. I fall to the ground, staring up at her. Her fearsome form that betrays her pure beauty. Big sis…

"Oh, look at you! Still kicking huh? Here, I'll let you in on a little secret. This area, this crater, I brought it here. This is MY world. MY domain! Everything in here is by my design, for my advantage! Of course, you'd never pick up on time or anything being off here because it's natural to you. To me. You are a failure! I will have to try once more with a new AION! Now, cease your vulgarity and vanish from my presence." I pick myself up but fall back down on my bottom. I try to hold myself up with my sword and speak to her. I can't… I can't but… I have to…

"Jur domain? Hwat ish gat?" I can't speak… I can barely think… she's… she's on a whole different level. I'm just a toy to her. Something she can easily pick up and discard. Shit, this is bad. I just did this to that demon and now she's doing it to me. Someone out there definitely has a sense of humour. I can't… can't think of anything to do. I'm a cornered animal… hoping to escape… despite… Did… did I already say that? What did I just say?

“Oh don’t you worry! I’ll end your suffering swiftly! Death truly is the answer. I’ll end your suffering. I’ll end everyone’s suffering. *And so shall your sins rise to the heavens.*” She closes her eyes and takes a deep breath. Alright Aion, fuck it! Now or never! I grab my blade and swing as hard as possible at her, hoping it will amount to something. I hear laughter… she’s laughing why is she-

“KUH!” I feel blade after blade force its way into my body. The pain was unlike any sensation I had ever felt before. I am being ravaged by a beast. Her strikes are full of rage and hatred. My arms… legs… chest… over and over and over again. For minutes… hours… days… the blades shred my body apart. I can feel my blood pooling underneath me. The sound of the weapons crashing into my bone and tearing my sinew. What overwhelming force.

“You could’ve just closed your eyes and went to sleep. Instead, you were stubborn. This is what your stubbornness has wrought!” She tosses her two blades away… at least… I think she does. The blood running down my head robs me of my sight as I try with all my might to stay conscious. This is the worst thing that could’ve happened today. The power of a God. She made…quick…quick work of me… and now…

M-my ch-chest… heaagh… huugh!

A blood curdling scream pierces the silence of the building, my own sword sealing my fate. What a cruel mistress, that fate. What if… what if I just stayed home today… watching T.V. with… heh… with Morrigan? That… that would’ve been nice. I feel the blood and tears pool in my eyes. I’ve failed. I’m going to die. I will die. Killed by… by my eldest sister. Not how I exactly pictured going out. It hurts. It hurts so much! I don’t want this I don’t want to die!

“And for good measure, let me ensure your passage to hell!” She rips my sword back out of me and stabs me once me. She digs it deep inside my chest. I think… I think I’ve lost the sensation of pain. Any remaining sense I have left is to protect my brain. My… my body has given up… shut

down… accepted its fate. Breathing… I can't… breathe… Fuck… ugh… I'm sorry Morrigan… I'm… I'm not coming back tonight.

Stained tears red of rage roll down the sides of my cheeks. I'm conscious enough to be sad and mad. I can't even see anymore. I lost… for the first time in my life… I lost. I lost Morrigan… I guess… I guess I'll be…

"A drama queen to the end. Watson!" The victor calls out, standing tall above her opponent shouting a name. I hear someone step out from the shadows. My older sister slams her foot on me. Securely stepping on my body, putting out the final embers of my flame.

"Master?" The unknown person speaks up. She's wearing a skirt. I can just barely make out her legs. This is the one I wanted… Watson…

"Get the angel and take her with you when returning to Leng. She lost but that doesn't mean she gets to rest in hell either."

"Of course. Is there anything else you would like done?" She asks timidly. She stands perfectly still. Her eyes closed. Hands on top of each other, hovering over her legs. Frozen in time. The seemingly perfect servant to the perfect master.

"Make sure that failure is dead. When she passes, the flow of time in this universe will shatter. That will unravel things, giving them rise to chaos, and the universe will finally break down."

"Of course, I'll take care of everything, Master." The girl replies. Her voice, she sounds…

"See it done." The woman bows her head to her master as she vanishes away with the snap of her fingers. The woman turns to face me and slowly approaches. How utterly repulsive… She won't even finish me off… letting her lackey do the rest. Fucking bitch.

"You had no chance. Nobody does. Not against her. She's had this plan in motion since the beginning of the universe. No, further than that. Since before time reset. She's had an eternity to plan. Nothing you could do, your Ministry, your friends, even me. There's nothing anyone can do…

to stop it… But… ” Universe? She trails off, digging through my pockets… she’s… taking my watch.

“You won’t need this anymore. I need to borrow it.” She lifts my pocket watch away. It’s covered in blood. “In exchange, I’m gonna let your friends find you. My Master has to stroke the flames, make sure all the puzzle pieces fall into place. She knows everything. She knows I’m going to let you live but it doesn’t matter. You’re not the Aion she needs. You’re going to play a different role now. I’ll even give you a few extra moments of life to make sure they receive you alive.” Not the Aion she needs? Heh, is she taking pity on me or something then? Whatever… not like I’ll be around for m-much longer. A few moments…

I stare at her as she wanders over to the other girl, picking her body up. Then she pulls something out of her coat. Is that… it is! She pulls out a watch of her own… So she also… maybe that’s why sister brought her. I thought she sounded familiar… like my master…

After Dark-2

“If you know anything, anything at all, please share. This isn’t the time for secrets.” I can hear how raspy and uneasy my voice is. I never liked when they made secrets like this. I can't trust them. This is why Aion stopped trusting them too. They always add a layer of deceit underneath their colourful words.

“Morg, I assure you; that’s everything I know. Whatever is going on is in Aion’s perfect hands.” It sounds like her, it has the same tone, but it’s wrong. This isn’t the Cordelia I first met.

“Don’t Morg me! You could’ve sentenced her to death! You don’t have a single person watching over the area?”

“Aion is watching it Morrigan. Is Aion not up to par? Does her ability not satisfy you?” Cordelia… Anything to avoid answering me. She's treating me like I’m an idiot.

“If you won’t tell me, I’ll just go myself.” I turn around to leave.

“WAIT! MORRIGAN!” As if on cue, Eris leaps out of the corner of the room towards me.

“Morrigan please, you can’t go yet.” Her face is in full pout mode. But I’m not going to be swayed. This constant deflection can’t be good.

“Sorry Eris, I need to see what’s going on.” Why are they so adamant in keeping me away?

“I’m serious Morrigan! Don’t worry! Aion went with Chrono and his goofy partner. They’ll be fine. Just trust them, yeah?” She smiles at me, I return the smile, staring back at Cordelia for a moment. Completely motionless. Stone faced. Hasn’t moved a thing aside from her lips to speak.

“Aion willingly went with Chrono?” I raise an eyebrow at the chaotic Goddess. Somehow she’s kept her spirits up through all this.

“Aion went with Chrono, Morrigan. There is nothing to worry about.” Cordelia tries to reassure

me again. I can't deny it what I heard. Anybody who runs into Aion and Chrono would struggle to win a fight. But it's been so long since the last time she's fought. Plus, Aion is never late. Never unless she intends to be late. It's suspicious. Something is off.

"Cordelia, there's a call for you. Would you like to take it?" Ceres enters the stage from the door to the right, holding a phone in her hands. This is almost all of us back together… before we…

"Yes, give me a moment. Morrigan, if you don't mind, we've some business to return to. We'll send Aion straight to you after she comes back to us, I promise." She says while hiding her face with the phone. I can't trust her. When you can only see a person's lips, they become so much more suspicious. But if I act out, they might become distrustful of me. Am I really that worried about this? It's a little late but Aion showed up yesterday a little late too. But only because she visited this place. I guess I'll be a little more patient then.

"Alright… I'll head back home." I'll play the good girl and listen. I just need to get some extra assurance from them. Reaching for the back side of my skirt, I tug on it a little, getting Lilith's attention. In her miniaturised, familiar form, Lilith floats into my hand and I keep her hidden behind my back.

Eris and Ceres seem to be helping Cordelia get back into the other room. Ceres stares at me, she doesn't look like she's doing too well herself. Eris is the opposite and shoots me a giant smile while opening the door for them. I guess all the chaos is keeping Eris feeling fresh. Ceres on the other hand…

"I'll send Aion straight to you Morrigan. Now go back home and relax. Your worry is unfounded." Ceres' voice fades as she enters the room with the other two girls. I wave at them and turn around. With a whisper, I delve into the details of my idea to Lilith.

"I'm going to exit but I will leave the door creaked open just a bit so you can stay behind Lilith. I want you to listen in to that conversation and tell me what they're talking about. Don't linger for too

long but if you can, wait for something that sounds important. Some big news or anything about Aion, ok?" Lilith hovers up and down, acknowledging my task and then floats towards the door. I take my leave and start walking down the staircase. Why am I walking down? I should fly back to appear normal to the others. I take a few more steps and turn back to face the building. It looks pretty menacing in the moonlight. Tonight's a full moon. A huge one. It gives the building a really creepy look. Maybe I'll draw at home to calm my nerves. Yeah that's a good idea. I'll go draw while waiting for Aion.

Suddenly, a horrible feeling hits me. It's worst feeling I've ever felt in my life. Lilith is in extreme distress! This… this is terrible. I feel like vomiting. Whatever Lilith learned isn't good! It's not good at all. I grab the stairway railing and heave, this is dreadful. My stomach is in a knot, twisted and uneasy. This can only mean one thing! Aion's in trouble! Oh Lilith! Hurry back! I need more details. What did you learn from that conversation? I stare closely at the building, hoping to see Lilith float out. Wrapping my arms around myself brings me a little comfort. I walk in place, hoping that it'll calm my nerves a little.

My breathing starts to get harsh; this is exactly what I was worried about. A silent, sinking feeling wreaks havoc on my insides as I can only wait. I tighten my grip around myself and move in place even more. I need to take my mind off of it for a second. I need a moment to catch up with my thoughts. I feel lost. More than lost. I feel hopeless. Oh Aion…

The world around me auctions itself off to the night. Daylight has faded but bright moonlight now contrasts with the pitch-black night. A single beacon to lead me to any sort of salvation. C'mon Lilith, what's taking you?! Don't tell me… Did they find you! Spot you floating around the door? Ugh… this is bad… my breathing… I'm not good at this. I'm not good in these situations. That's why Aion takes care of things for me. That's why I need to know Aion is safe and that I can have her back home tonight.

Floating over my face, Lilith returns, and not a moment too soon. I eagerly await her recording of the conversation.

“Ok Lilith, let the tape roll!” She nods her head at my words. The conversation she listened in on enters my mind.

““No, no, no, no, no! C’mon man! Doesn’t this go any faster?!” A man’s voice!?

“Chrono… you know what this car does.” Another man’s voice… The first one sounds like Chrono. That second one should be that partner of his. They’re panicked. Something must’ve happened to Aion!

“I’m just… Something bad happened. She’s been gone too long! We don’t know what’s in there.” They’re definitely talking about Aion! My intuition was correct.

“The first building, right? That’s the one you guys walked past?” The other voice asks.

“Yeah, bring us right up to it. She’s gotta be in there! She has to be!” Chrono shouts.

“Chrono! Just calm down man. You’re not being levelheaded. Not your usual self.”

“I’m… just… it’s…” His voices fades.

“Listen to your partner Chrono. This was meant to be. You helped bring her here after all.” Cordelia’s voice?! That’s all the evidence I need. Nothing is going to get in my way now. Not Cordelia, not Ceres, not Eris. Aion’s in danger!

“Thanks Lilith. You did a good job bringing this back to me and staying undetected. Go home and wait for us ok? I’ll be quick.”

I give Lilith a hug and push her in the direction of our house. Whatever the issue is, I’ll get to the bottom of it and then Aion will never have to do anything dangerous again!

I stretch my arms and legs then let my wings out. They went to the crater. The place where it all went wrong. Don’t worry Aion, I’m on my way!

My wings spread up and I push myself up into the air. I smash them against the currents floating

in the sky, flying faster than I have ever flown before. The first building? Let's see where this magical building is. I approach the rim of the crater, I say it's a fair guess to think that Aion and Chrono also approached from this direction. It's the most direct way here from Aulis.

Moonlight illuminates the land below. If it was the first building on their journey into the crater then, it should be that one! I stare down at a dilapidated building that holds tonight's fate. I dive down headfirst to get there as fast as possible. A car comes into view, Chrono and his partner are still here. Aion should also be here. I crash into the ground by the right of the car and run inside the building.

"Aion? Aion? Where are you? Aion!?" I yell into the empty building. My voice echoes, I stare into the hollow space. A couple of heads perk up and I sprint toward them. They're crouched down. So they must be by Aion right? They have to be why else would they be here if not for Aion's presence it just doesn't make any sense. One of the figures stands up. A man in a suit with hair like Aion. Chrono.

"Where is she Chrono!?" I scream out at him, hoping to solve the feeling of dread taking residence in my heart.

"M-Morrigan? I… you should… turn around Morrigan. I… I don't want you seeing this." He moves his body to the left. Is he hiding something? His partner turns his head around and looks up at me. This… is a joke right? They're goofing off… doing stupid guy stuff like playing 21 or marbles or or or or or or or...

I stare into the gap between the two men. It's some sort of figure. I can see the outline of a body laying down. Dark black surrounds them, like oil beneath a leaky car. Th-that's odd. What is that? It's a mess in the building. The building already had a stain like that right?

"Morrigan, get in the car. We'll discuss it on the way back." His voice is firm but lacks confidence, I can hear it. Something wrong. It's definitely wrong! Lilith shared the conversation

with me! Chrono was already panicked!

“Where’s Aion, Chrono?” I take a step forward. He stares at me, unmoving.

“Morrigan. The car. Please.” I take another step and his partner looks back down at whatever’s on the ground. And that turn was all I needed. A single glance at the thing that shattered my whole world. My purpose gone with her pale, blood-stained face. It fell. I fell.

A mysterious light blasts itself on the ground behind Chrono, clearing displaying my dread to me. Unreal. Impossible! I refuse to believe it! Sprinting at Chrono I raise my fists at him and punch him as hard as I can. I punch and punch and punch at him. My Aion! My Aion!

“What did you DO CHRONO? WHY IS SHE… HOW IS SHE… SHE’S… SHE’S… ” My nails dig into my palms, I have nothing now. No more smiles. No more frowns. No more laughing. No more crying. I only feel rage. Pure unbridled rage. Rage at Chrono for failing to watch Aion. Rage at Cordelia for sending her out to do this. Rage at myself for not being able to save her. Rage at myself for not being able to help her.

Hate at myself for letting this happen. Hate at myself because I wasn’t there for her. Hate for the world that made us like this. Hate for the world that hates us back. Hate.

“Oh Morrigan…You didn’t listen to me. Didn’t head on home like a good little bird. That’s a shame. I guess that’s that then.” The voice that calls from the light freezes my blood.

“Y-you? How did…When did you?” Chrono’s voice sounds shocked.

“Oh Chrono… you’re still here?” She nonchalantly says.

“Nifty trick with the light but you’re the orchestrator of all this aren’t you? What did she give you to set this up? What did you do?” He replies.

“I don’t answer to you. Now, step aside, time reject. I'm here for Morrigan." I can hear Chrono scoff. What happened? I zoned out for a bit. Oh right. Aion.

"What happened to Aion, Cordelia?" I ask as if I'm not fighting back the impulse to slaughter her. I won't get an answer through violence. Not yet at least.

"Look on the ground and see for yourself silly~" Her voice is cheery. There's not a hint of pain or remorse in what she said. Unfortunate.

"What. Happened. To. Aion? I will not ask again." I take steps towards Cordelia. Each step a little closer to an answer. Cordelia takes a deep breath and begins to speak again.

"She faced her destiny, Morrigan. Power far beyond her own. It was her or us. That was the deal."

"Her or us?" Standing there. STANDING! This disgusting bitch! Faking her injuries! To trick us? Deceive us? Into believing her? That's why Aion's dead?!

"You say that standing over her body? How dare you!" I reach for Aion. Chrono is standing off to the side covering his face with his right hand. Her sword lays flat next to her body. I didn't even notice… Killed by her own weapon. How cruel. How unimaginably cruel. I reach for it and pull it up. Cordelia begins speaking again, but I don't care about what she has to say. Aion… my love…

"What do you think Morrigan? A fair deal I'd say." Chrono's voice also enters my head. What's he going on about?

"A deal? For what? Your life? Is this how you get by? That's sad… " In the corner of my eye I see a glint. A faint one, but it's there. That means there's a chance!

"Morg…" I so very badly want to shoot my attention downward. A whisper! That was her voice! She's… How much pain is she in? Poor Aion. But, stay strong. If I show anything slightly off, Cordelia will pick up on it. Aion's rewinding was getting worse and worse… She couldn't even fix the scratches on her face the other day. No… No I need to believe in her right now. I can feel my hands shaking. My head is getting light. A host of emotions are messing with my head right now. But be strong. Aion would be strong for you.

"I think I'll pass. Actually, I'll counteroffer Cordelia. You let us take Aion's body for proper send off, and I won't have Ceres and Eris come back to give you your send off. Sound like a deal?" I stand back up and stare into Cordelia's soul. Armed with Aion's sword, I wouldn't be a push over. Sword fighting is my thing anyways.

"Deal." Huh? S-seriously? She agreed?

“Deal?!" Chrono shouts out in confusion.

"Like I said, it was her or us. I fulfilled my end of the bargain. We're here. She's not. I have no qualms with you, regardless of the fact that you may now have some with me. I did want to make sure she's dead but… with who she faced… Whatever. Take her and get out of my sight." Cordelia turns around and motions her arm out into the emptiness of the building. Eris leaps out and gets behind Cordelia.

"N-nothing personal Morrigan. Just following orders… " She keeps her gaze averted from Aion's body. Wait, something is off. Why isn’t she looking at Aion? Why did she stutter when speaking? Eris is too hyperactive sit idly by. She strives in strife and discord. In fact, she has enhanced senses in the darkness… She might’ve picked up on Aion’s whisper… Is she playing the fool to trick Cordelia? Maybe she’s not completely traitorous.

"Chrono, meet me at my place so we can get this all sorted out." I crouch back down to Aion, running my fingers over her blood-stained face. Hang in there… just a little more… I've got them playing along.

“Y-yeah. Right, ok. Cassidy, start the car.” The silent scruffy guy in the back runs out, listening to Chrono.

"I'll fly on ahead. You remember where right?" I ask him. Chrono nods and then I turn my sights on Eris and Cordelia.

"I hope I never have the misfortune of ever seeing you again." Picking Aion up, I turn away from

my former team and walk out of the building with Chrono.

"I'm sorry Morrigan! Really! I'm sorry!" Eris screams at the top of her lungs. I suppose letting Aion survive will lead to more chaos down the road. A double edged sword.

Chrono and I exit the building. A car rolls up next to Chrono. He opens up the door and sits inside.

"We didn't know… it just… " He says.

"My place. Go there. Double, triple check nobody follows you. Got it?" I stare into his eyes, and he stares back.

"Y-yeah. We'll make sure 100%."

"Good." I spread my wings out and flap them. I jump into the sky and shoot straight back home. The cool night air pushes against me, I feel like I'm starting to wake up.

"Mor...gan…" The whisper makes it past the sound of the winds, and I start to cry. Aion... Aww... my poor Aion. Tears from my face drips down onto hers. Never again. Never again will you need to work for them. We'll run away. We'll find something. We'll make it work. We have to.

Dramatic-3

"Stay with me Aion! It's just a bit further! Stay with me!" I hopelessly sigh. This is the worst scenario. Absolutely awful.

"Lilith! Lilith! We're back!" My shouting makes me feel like I'm doing something. It's helping me be focused. Keep that focus, that cool attitude, just like Aion would. It'll be fine. We'll roll the time back and heal the wounds.

I brace for landing, swinging my wings to hover just above the ground as I slowly descend. I look back at the path, trying to see the headlights from Chrono's car. Nothing yet. He'll show up. He said he would. I need to get Aion onto a mattress or something to lay her down. What can I do with what I have? A first aid kit isn't prepared for all of this. I finally realise how much blood has spilled. The lower half of my dress completely soaked in crimson, my hands pruning. This definitely isn't good! I step towards the doorway but stop because of an odd sound. Did I just step in water? It doesn't rain anymore…

A breeze hits us from behind as I open the door. No more distractions, just get inside Morrigan! I rush past the foyer to the living room and set Aion on the couch. I pull her sword off of my back and toss it down on the floor. No time to think about the mess, just get some bandages, towels, anything! I run into the kitchen and pull out the first aid box. Some linen bandages here. They're not enough but it's better than nothing. Oh! There should be some towels in the bathroom! Quickly, I run up the stairs and burst into the bathroom. I gather the towels up and leap down to head back into the living room.

I glance at Aion's face. She doesn't look like she's gotten worse… but I doubt she's any better…

Don't you die on me! I press the towels onto her body. I don't know if it will do anything at this point but anything at this point is worth trying. I tie a towel around her body and get up. I wander over to the door. The dark night stares into our foyer as I look for signs of a car. Nothing yet. Insanity, it was only a few hours ago that I pulled the towels out of the dryer. What a day…

I turn back around and freeze. Something standing over Aion. Chrono? No. Who is this? Did someone follow me? Where's the sword? I need a weapon. No, Morrigan keep your head straight. Aggressive action might be a trigger for them. Just slowly, calmly walk into the room. If they wanted to kill Aion they'd have done it by now. I step into the foyer and stare at the figure. It stays in place, completely still. So far so good. Play it cool. No need for any more fights tonight. I tightly wrap my arms around my chest. This is beyond frustrating. But it's for Aion's sake. Everything is for Aion…

My steps into the living room don't trigger a response from the creature. Now that I'm a bit closer I can see it. It's just a girl. She's wearing a weird hoodie and oh… OH! That weapon! Th-the trident girl! A trident is in her hands! The couch hid it from view. Oh my god. Ok. What to do what to do? Did Aion say she talked to her? Oh god I can't remember. Aion struggled in her fight with her, what chance do I have?

"She's not the one I want. She can lead me to the one I want." She suddenly starts speaking. H-huh?

"I watched the entire fight. Your friends set her up. She was winning too. Until another one showed up." Winning? Aion? Set up? Another one?

"H-hold on a second… Could you explain please?" I try cracking a smile. Can I even move these muscles after everything that's happened today? Her head finally looks up at me. O- oh she's cute. Why was she after Aion? What the heck is going on?

"The demon girl lost to Aion." She knows Aion's name! "After the demon lost…A new one

showed up. I've never seen her before but I have a feeling she'll lead me to the one I need. The one that will bring Watson back to us." A new one? Watson? Aion and I briefly talked about this Watson. She wanted to find information about her. So much so she's now here on the couch within an inch of her life.

She pulls a bottle out from her hoodie pocket. The bottle is crystal clear and inside is some sort of blueish liquid. What is that?

"Do you mind? If I just…" She says as I continue stare at the bottle. That looks like no good. I crouch down to the floor and reach for the sword. I raise it towards her, stepping next to Aion. I take Aion's hand in mine. It's cold.

"I… I won't let you do it. If you want her, you'll have to get through me." I feel Aion squeeze my hand with hers. Life still spurs within her. I won't let you down Aion. I'll save you, at the cost of my own life if I need to.

"Hey hey hey! Whoa what's going on in here?" A male voice from the foyer shouts. Chrono!

"Chrono… She's… I don't know what she is but… " I reply.

"I already said, I'm not here for her. I'm here because she can lead me to her. Or the… one I want is her and… she can lead me to the her and uh…" She trails off, scratching at her head with the bottle. She pulls it back down and takes the top off, a slight chill runs throughout the room. She pours the concoction over Aion from head to toe. Despite the bottle's small size, quite a bit is coming out. A magical bottle? A magical substance? Oh gosh who cares about that. What does this thing do? Then she puts the bottle into Aion's mouth? What the hell?

"Our dying Time Goddess can lead you to… who?" Chrono steps into the room and stands behind me. I can see his partner stayed at the front door.

"She's not dead. Do they just let anybody out of the Academy now. You're seriously dumb!" She taunts Chrono and fumes exit his nose, I can tell he's no fan of it. I grip Aion's hand and stare up at

the girl.

“What’s your name? Who are you? Why are you here? What did you just put on Aion!?” This isn’t the best way to go about things but asking straight forward is… straight forward.

“Her other sword? Where is it?” She ignores my questions. That’s not the answer I was hoping for. What other sword?

“H-her other sword?” I reply. The girl pulls the bottle out of Aion’s mouth. It’s empty now. She closes it and puts it back into her pocket.

“Her other sword. Aion has two blades. You’re only holding one. Where’s the other Morrigan.” M-Morrigan?! She knows my name? No! I need an answer!

“Answer my questions and I answer yours. Now answer!” I look back at Chrono and he nods at me. I’m not leaving this conversation empty handed. I look at Aion’s face, that’s all the motivation I need to make sure Aion didn’t fight for nothing. If this girl has information, I will get it out of her.

“I ASKED FIRST BUB!” She shouts at me. Sh-she… this girl! What a brat! Fine! But so help me God if she doesn’t answer my question we’re having Lamb Amirstan for breakfast, lunch, and dinner tomorrow. I take a deep breath, let’s just calm down. Everything is fine.

“Ok…Ok. Aion lost her second blade. She used a significant portion of her power to try stopping the Advent. Aion can’t control time as well anymore. It’s not just her either. We all gave something up.” The room is silent. Nobody makes a sound as I pull back the veil.

“What did you give up Morrigan? I want to be able to trust you, to believe you.” She asks me. I stare down into my rustic dress, gripping at Aion’s hand for a sense of security. The real reason that I’m here with her, exiled away from the other girls…

“What I gave up? I gave my life up in service of my world.” Silence is once again the name of the game. It looks like she wants to open her mouth and say something, but words never exit. I turn around and look at Chrono. He gives me a slight smile, perhaps trying to reassure me and might

even go, “You did what you had to Morrigan.” Ah, my secret is out now.

“So you two, no, all five of you lost your authority?” The stranger asks. I nod at her and look back at Aion.

“It hit us at varying degrees. Aion as I just explained. Ceres' nature is decaying and dying. Eris and Cordelia… it doesn’t look like they lost much anymore… especially after what just happened back there but, they were bed ridden for months. Or were supposedly bed ridden.”

“And you? You gave up your life yet still stand? What magic is this?” Her question for me is something I don’t want to get into but I need to gain her trust so… I let go of Aion’s hand and set her sword down. I get back up and move to stand in front of the stranger. I take a step in front of her, but not with my body, with my soul. As my body drops to the floor, no different than a lifeless doll, I hear a yelp from the foyer. Guess that nerdy looking guy must be afraid of ghosts.

“I’m a walking, talking corpse. I gave it all up that day, so that humanity might still have a chance to live. Everything I have done since the day I died is a bluff. Aion took on the role of supporting me.” I watch Chrono crouch down to lift up the guy next to him.

I don’t even show this to Aion… I mean… ahaha… why would I? Why would she like someone like me. A hollow shell of a person who will constantly remind her of her failure. Just being near me must always be annoying. That’s why she never lets me in. Never lets me get close and-

“HEY! You listening ghost girl? I’ve decided to join you all. At least until I get what I want.” Her shouting grabs my attention. I got lost in my thoughts for a moment there. This is probably awkward. I float back into my body, regaining control of my corporeal form. That guy is still on the ground… Now I feel bad.

“I’m Daphne. I’m looking for a detective, goes by the name Cassandra Watson.” My ears perk up. Cassandra Watson! The girl Aion is looking for!

“It may be hard to believe but, I come from a different timeline. A friend of mine and her magic

sent me to the last place Watson was at. When I arrived there was no Watson to be found, see my issue?" I nod at her and think about what went through her friend's mind to send her over here. Not to be rude but something is kinda off with her. I look at her and she begins to dig into her ear with her fingers. She sniffs them after pulling them out. Ew…

"Hold on. You were summoned here by this friend or?" Chrono chimes in, he takes a couple steps forward himself and stands behind me.

"She used magic to bring me here I dunno." She's staring at Chrono. She's incredibly levelheaded, despite everything that's been going on. Chrono has been too. I feel like I'm the odd one out for not thinking this is a completely normal situation.

"So you don't know how you got here, or at least know the process behind your travel. That's a shame but oh well." He replies.

"Yeah, so what? What is it to ya pretty boy?" She asks him. Chrono lets out an exaggerated sigh, I'm guessing he's not a fan of comments like that. He runs his left hand through his hair and smiles.

"Nothing. Nothing at all. Anyways Daphne. How were you going to get back?"

"Ah…" She replies succinctly, scratching the back of her head.

"Ah?!" "Ah?!" Both Chrono and I reply in similar shock. This girl, Daphne, she's kind of an idiot. She must be a much better fighter than thinker because I can't imagine how she's gotten this far without help.

"Nothing to worry about Daphne. I have an idea. A crazy idea. But I think we'll need to quickly take action!" Chrono walks over to his partner and lightly pats him on the face. The cowardly guy gets up and then Chrono walks up to Daphne. He extends his hand out for a shake. Daphne takes the offer with a smile.

"Gosh… How long was I out today?" That voice! I instantly turn towards the couch, hardly believing the voice I heard! Chrono rushes to the backside of the furniture and gets down to take a

look too. N-no way… h-how… sh-she-she's…

"AION!" I wrap my arms around her as tight as I can squeeze her with all my might!

"H-hey man! That hurts. What are you doing?" It's her! Sh-she's back! How?! What? The bottle? I pull back and let out the most cheerful giggle of my life! Aion!

"Amazing, her body reset! How did that happen?" Chrono stares at Aion completely flabbergasted. His surprise further surprises me! But who cares, Aion's back!

"Yeah that's the ol' Watson special. A special mixture of uh… things… that… do… things. It was for me if I lost a fight but I think this was a better use for it." She ends her sentence with a highly suspicious cough. This girl… I'm honestly starting to like that she's so dumb. It's like her charm point.

"Watson Special, eh? And this is was made by Cassandra I assume? The Cassandra of your timeline right?" The quiet scaredy pants guy walks in from the foyer following his questions.

"Yeah bub what's it to you?" She fires one back of her own, with a little extra sass sitting on the end.

I place my hands on Aion's back and help her sit up. She really is all better! The cuts! The slashes! Everything! Not a trace! Well, all the dried-up blood but who fucking cares! AION!

Daphne walks over to the dorky guy while Aion starts to situate herself on the couch. Chrono steps back. He smiles at me then turns his attention to whatever Daphne and the dork are talking about. I don't care about them right now. True and blue, it's her. Her flawless face, perfect eyes, beautiful lips, hearty smile, chiselled abs, and long dancer's legs! My heart! The butterflies are having a field day inside of me. She's ok… She's ok… I let emotion take the wheel and begin to cry. What a twist of fate, something didn't go completely horrible for us for once.

"O-Oh hey man? Are you ok? Morrigan what the heck? Why are you crying?" Aion says.

"No reason Aion. I'm just…really, really glad to see you up!" She stares at me like I'm crazy

but…you know maybe I am. I am just really crazy about you Aion.

"Morrigan…oh my god! You're covered in blood! W-what happened?" Aion gets up and pulls me up with her. She then looks down at herself.

"Oh shit?! MORRIGAN! WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED MAN? I'MSOCONFUSEDOHMYGODNOTHINGMAKESSENSERIGHTNOWDIDIDOSOMETHINGWRONGWHYAREWEBOTHLIKETHISICAN'TREMEMBERANYTHING!"

"A-Aion! Aion!" I catch her attention. This must be a lot to take in, and I don't know what that concoction even fully did to her. A hot refreshing shower and a clean change of clothes. Maybe even a bath. That'll fix things up a bit.

"Aion, let's go up and shower. I'll try to explain things to you as best I can ok?" She nods at me, and I look into the foyer, Daphne and the other guy are gone. Chrono is standing by the door, he motions for me to come over.

"If you're hungry there's leftover pizza in the fridge Aion. I just need to take care of something really quick. Wait for me?" I smile at her and she nods again, staring at her lower half in disgust. This is really gross. I probably shouldn't be ok with it either but whatever. I make my way to the door to find out what Chrono wants.

"What's up?" I ask.

"We think it'd be best if we discussed work away from Aion. Don't want to send even more shock into her system when she sees Daphne with us." He says.

"Right, makes sense." I reply.

"So we're gonna take her to the place we're staying at. Bake her some sweets or something like that. She seems to be at that level of bribery for info."

"Did she tell you guys about the thing she gave Aion? What it does or anything like that?"

"Ah, yeah she said it was to heal her wounds if she got any, but she used it all on Aion. She's

really banking on Aion being able to find this Cassandra character..”

“I see. Healing properties huh?” Chrono nods but then shakes his head a second after. “Well…it seems it’s not as clear what it does after consumption. Apparently it started out more as a lethal injection. She assured me it’s no longer lethal and that this variation has gone through a few changes. Just in case, keep an eye on Aion yeah?” I hear a sneeze from behind and turn around. Aion is staring at Chrono and I laugh. Chrono raises his head and waves at Aion. She makes a disgusted face and then takes the stairs up to the bathroom.

“There’s that face she loves to give me. She really is back. Again, keep an eye on her. Anything unusual happens you contact us, ok?” He says while handing me a cellphone. Wouldn’t it be easier to just give us the number instead?

“Ok. I’ll keep a close eye on her.” I respond. All this is starting to make me feel nervous.

“Great. We’ll come by tomorrow morning. Make sure everything is ok and all that. Sound good?” I nod and smile at him.

“Yeah. I’m glad you guys were there and everything, even if at times I sounded like I wasn’t.”

“Don’t sweat it. There are just… Hey you know what? Don’t worry about it at all. Let’s talk tomorrow. I’m sure you’ve gone through enough emotions tonight to go match an entire lifetime. Well, rest up Morrigan. Call if you need anything alright?” I nod my head and he smiles at me. His eyes travel above and behind me, his smile breaks down a bit and he nervously laughs. Guess Aion must be staring knives into him.

“Later!” I wave to him.

“Bye!” He heads out to his car, and I can see Daphne in the back seat, poking at the guy driving. Those two got along pretty quickly. Or at least Daphne seems to be friendly with him. I shut the door and take a deep breath. It was a long day, an extremely long day. Some R&R would do me, my body, a lot of good. Turning around, I look up at the balcony and wave to Aion. She waves back and

we burst out in smiles, laughing. Why we're laughing, I don't know, but for the first time in a long time, she was smiling. A real, genuine smile.

"Hey! You just gonna stand there gawking or get that mess of off you?" She shouts down at me, throwing a towel my way.

"I'll be there!" I travel up the staircase to join Aion. I'm not going to shy away from her this time.

"H-hey. I was you know… just in the house and thought I'd… stop by." Aion stares at Morrigan, the deep gaze of longing she found in her friend's sapphire eyes pierced her heart. The reality of the situation is that a couple hours ago, Aion almost died. Nervously, Morrigan moves further into the bathroom.

"Oh? This house? Wow man that's crazy because, this is my house!" Erupting in laughter,

Aion steps into the shower. Morrigan's mind is completely fixated on the shapes and curves found on Aion. Lifting her own garments up and away, she travels towards the shower, hoping not to be too obtrusive to her friend.

"Is there enough space? I don't want to intrude…" Morrigan asks.

"Oh you just want to watch. You always watch. Well this time… I'm not letting you!" Aion pushes her arms out and wraps them around Morrigan like a snake. The crow is captured by the predator; she can only wait for her mind to fade as the beast begins to devour her.

"No escape! You're getting cleaned up whether you like it or not!" Aion's slender, lithe hands make their way down Morrigan's body. The warm water splashes off of their bodies onto the walls around them begin to paint a tale of fantasy.

"I can clean myself just fine! I just wanted to… " Trailing off, Morrigan stares up at Aion. Utterly star struck by the other woman, she can only think of how much the other really means to her.

“Just wanted to what? Get a peak?” Aion spits her words out like venom at her friend. An accusatory statement to be sure, but she misunderstood the meaning of the words said to her. In Morrigan’s heart lay sheer admiration for her friend. Time and time again they ended up at each other’s side. Up to the end Morrigan was next to Aion and Aion next to her and yet feelings of doubt still weigh down on her heart.

“I just wanted to make sure you were ok. I just need some body soap and I’ll be on my way.” In a noticeably duller tone, Morrigan turns around and reaches for the soap, eager to finish her business and find herself floating over the sea of foam.

“Uh uh uh. Tch tch tch. I don’t allow you to leave. I think we need to have a few words.” Aion grabs Morrigan by her right hand and pulls the woman into her body. Morrigan finds herself nearly face to face with Aion’s chest. She looks up once more but, the overly confident and arrogant stare had vanished from Aion’s face. It became a look of longing and desire. Her sapphire eyes creaked down, a soft, kind, and welcoming smile, her head slightly tilted to the left.

“Y-yeah well… What do you want to talk about? Need something cleaned or!?” Shattering her train of thought, Aion’s face hovers just over her own. The smile she was staring at now is now pursed, pushing into her, and opening her lips up. Both girls shut their eyes and share a moment, frozen in time, away from the worries of the world. The singular transcendent bliss of releasing her feelings for Aion overtake her reason. Morrigan wraps her hands around Aion, holding her tightly. Aion responds in turn by taking hold of Morrigan and the heat of the water adds to the sensation.

Morrigan’s fingers dig into Aion’s back, as if she were gripping her prey from the air and carrying it away to her nest. Aion didn’t seem to mind however and perhaps enjoyed the feeling of being grabbed. The feeling of being desired, wanted, by her love, slowly over takes all the other thoughts in her mind.

Aion does the same in turn, tightening her grip around her prey. Slithering around her backside

for a few moments, letting her slightly pruned fingers run up and down, tickling her crow before constricting around her. Morrigan didn't seem to mind the feeling. In fact she encourages it by letting slight moans out under her breath.

The sound of lips crashing and parting from each other echoes through the heads of both girls. Albeit a little sloppy and perhaps neither girl fully confident in what they were doing, continue to swap spit. Morrigan pooling the saliva in her mouth and pushing it into Aion's, makes Aion stand on her toes as her mouth is violated by her lover. Every moment lasts an eternity.

As a mutual ending to the kiss arrives, the two pull their heads away from each other. Long, thick strings of saliva hang down in between them. Neither side declares themselves the loser of the tongue battle nor does either side claim a victory. Panting noises fill the room as the steamy shower properly fogs up the glass within.

"Y-you're not?" Morrigan asks.

"No. Never." Aion responds.

"Good." Morrigan smiles. With a snap of her fingers, they're both dried, rapped up in robes, and in Aion's room. The logistics of how she prepared it all might be interesting but, that's not important right now.

"A-Aion!? This is going fast. Wow. I'm a little…" Morrigan stares in awe as she's seated on Aion's bed, staring.

"Impressed? Surprised? Astonished? Amazed? I know, I know. Truly is it unfair to the universe that someone as brilliant as I exist and am here, looking to tend to your every whim." Aion winks, blowing a kiss and smirking. The only thing that matters now is the woman staring back at her. Although when she thought about it, it brought her back down to Earth. The smile that made her smile. The smile that stares back at her. That smile that loves her for her. She walks away from the bedroom door, towards the source of the fluttery, fluffy feelings stirring within her.

“So what do you say Morrigan? I mean…since I went through all the trouble of getting you here maybe you could…” Aion coyly asks.

“Shut up and fuck me Aion.” Bluntly said, Morrigan pulls at Aion’s robe, dragging her love into her and onto the bed. She tears Aion’s robe off, she gazes at Aion’s perfect body. The low lighting of the room provides perfect shadows and angles to amplify Aion’s own beauty. Morrigan grabs Aion’s chest and stares up, realising where her impatience has brought her. To her further surprise however, Aion is shyly looking away. Her legs are a trembling mess, her long arms feel heavy. Boisterous and proud was no longer the woman to be found. She was shy, cute, and quiet. Her big mouth silenced by the touch of her love. She will struggle admit it later, but the attention she’s receiving is all she ever wanted.

Morrigan carefully traces the areola of her love with her index fingers. Her nails slowly run circles around them. She stares at Aion’s face with each revolution. Small, timid, quiet moans escape her mouth, as if she was trying to hide her voice from someone. It only further encouraged the attack. Her index fingers pick themselves up and bring her thumbs along to pinch Aion’s nipples. She vaguely recalls that pinching is a powerful technique to use against Aion.

She wants to hear Aion shamelessly moan out in pleasure, for her. With that, she gently squeezes and pulls, eager to see that perfect face shatter into one seeking pleasure and desire. After all, that’s what Morrigan wanted in return. To feel love and desire. To know she was wanted by the person most important to her in the entire world.

Which did more than ignite the flames of passion within her. She gave the nipples a final tug and brought her face up. Placing her lips on the puffy, erected tissue, she covers the left one in her spit. She runs her tongue over and over on it. She places her mouth over it and sucks on it while her hands travel to Aion’s back. Slowly, she rubs up and down the other’s body. Shivers travel far across Aion’s body from the sensation of Morrigan’s fingers to the lips wrapped around her nipple. Aion’s

moans are no longer fun sized. She couldn't help but let the next few whimpers out with her full voice.

"M-Morrigan…"

"Shh." Morrigan pulls on her own robe, letting her body air out with the energised current flowing in the room. She lays herself over the mattress, her eyes staring down over her own body. Icy blue lipstick stains were already pressed against her, leaving behind the trail of devious marks from her neck to her legs. It appears Aion had already won a very single sided battle in between leaving the shower and settling down in the bedroom.

I wrap my hands around you, holding, gripping you in my embrace. All I knew was I wanted this to last forever. My friend, my partner, my love was finally in my hands, and I never want to let go. All of our work, pain, suffering had finally let us a moment's rest with which we could simply be. Her hand wanders down on me, skulking across my icy skin. Every hair on me is standing up as I give up the security of my body to her.

"Morrigan."

"Aion."

Her finger slides over a slippery slit. I can't help but feel embarrassed but I'm happy to be able to share myself with her. It wasn't just that, it's me finally letting myself be comfortable enough to let someone touch me like this again. Aion tightens her grip around me, holding me into her as close as she can get me. She gently inserts a finger inside. I try my best to stay silent but moans escape me. I dig my nails into her skin at the sensation.

"I want to hear you too, Aion."

"Wha?" She replies.

Pulling back, I grab Aion's chest again. Squeezing her breast with my left hand, while sending my right down to tickle her insides. Little by little, Aion's reserved moans open up into audible

cries. Her body unable to hide what she feels. She knows it, I know it. There is one goal here, to make Aion cum. Aion's body responds with plentiful yields. Her yelps of pleasure me know my job is working well. In and out my finger glides, drenched in affection, our passion.

"Tell me what you want Aion." I smugly ask.

"Me? I…ugh…"

Her mind knows what she wants. Her body knows. All I want is to hear it. Suddenly, Aion kisses me. Kisses hit me on my chest, my neck, my mouth last. She steals my breath. Maybe that question got her a little upset. I didn't get an answer from her after all. I stop my finger aerobatics in her hole and run them up her stomach. The wet trail of love runs all the way up to her neck. Aion must be enjoying this because her eyes roll back into her head. I stay silent, staring at her. She stares back at me.

"Why me… What did I do… to deserve…" Aion says quietly. She presses her finger up against my pussy. Electrifying. A magical sensation that we share together. She glides it back and forth.

"Why you huh… Because I love you." I reply. I want to look away in embarrassment. No, not now. Not ever again. How could I even, with my lips covering her finger in love. I don't need to be particularly special, I don't need to act differently, I don't need to pretend anymore. She loves me and I love her.

"C'mere you!" Aion pulls me into her, then falls onto the bed with me. Kisses and slaps close out the night, both girls happily enjoying their newfound freedom. The nervous glances and awkward pauses lose their place in this bedroom. They are replaced by giggles and warm glances that hold affirmation, care, and consideration.

No New World-4

BZZZZZ BZZZZZ

BZZZZZ

BZZZZZ

I stretch my hand out over to my nightstand, slamming down on the alarm. Goodness, it's so bright. The morning light assaults my eyes. I wiggle in place. My body is reluctant to move but Chrono said he'd stop by in the morning to talk. I reach across the bed and my arm lands on a foreign object. What the hell is that? I leap up in terror screaming.

"Kyaa!" My voice escapes my mouth in a hurry.

"GAH! WHAT IS IT? WHERE'S THE FIRE?" A shocked voice screeches in return.

"A-Aion! NO! THERE'S NOT A FIRE!" I forgot she was here. I felt her body and shouted in fear like a goof.

"Oh ok." She lays back down and pulls the blanket back over herself. Th-that was quick! Oh, I'm sleeping here tonight. No, I already slept here and she's sleeping now which means we slept in the same bed. I should get breakfast started while she catches a few more zzz's. Yeah, good idea.

I begin to sneak out of the room, trying not to further disturb Aion. The door is already open. I guess we forgot to shut it last night. Neither of us leave our doors open at night. Well, I'm sure we felt comfortable enough to this time. I look back at her resting face. Gorgeous. Yeah, we are comfortable enough now. I'm gonna give her the best damn breakfast she's ever had! A little stop in the bathroom to take care of business. A touch of Quelques Fleurs, a reminder of better times. All right, I'm all set.

I walk down the staircase and enter the foyer, turning left to the living room and then head into

the kitchen. Let's see what we have in the fridge. Feels like it's been forever since I've looked inside this thing. Eggs, milk, juice, butter, ham, bacon, potatoes, cheese, chicken breast, and pizza. Hmm, I bet I could make a mean breakfast burrito for her. I pull the eggs, bacon, and potatoes out of the fridge and grab a skillet and spatula to get the cooking started. I turn the stove on and set the skillet down. Now how should I portion this out. If we both get one burrito then…four slices of bacon should be good. Two for her two for me. Yeah, a bunch of sliced up potatoes and an egg should fill these out perfectly.

I think the skillet has warmed up enough, I set the bacon inside. The sound of sizzling slowly starts up. That's a good noise. I grab a potato. Now where's that potato cutter? I know we have one. Every time you need something, it vanishes. This is the one truth of the universe. Oh the bacon! I rush back to the stove and flip all the slices. That was close. Ok, potato cutter, I need you to come out now and be our breakfast before the bacon finishes. Should've grabbed that precut stuff. Well with how the world is right now, beggars can't be choosers.

There it is, hiding in the back of our cupboard. Good! I flip the bacon over again. It has that cooked texture, I'll have to be quick. I run back over to the other side of the kitchen and grab a knife. I peel the skin from the potato as fast as I can and then run it under water to get the excess starch off. The bacon should be just about done so I pull out a plate from another cupboard and set it on the counter. A quick flip to make sure they're done. They look good. Better get these things off before they start to burn. I lift them away from the skillet and shake them a little, to get some excess oil off of them. Setting them onto the plate, I grab the potato and press the cutter down on it. There we go, lots of nice little potato cubes that'll cook quick and easy.

Starting with the bacon always makes everything easier because you can reuse the oil at all parts of cooking. Admittedly it's not the healthiest but it's good to be resourceful. Can't always cook with olive oil when you're out in the wild! Dropping the potatoes in, they sizzle just like the bacon did. I

crack the window to the right of the stove open to get some fresh air and I walk over to the back door, opening that up too. Although the air is already ripe with the smell of food but, it'd be nice to get in some of that morning air. Let's give the potatoes a couple of minutes before flipping. Hmm, some coffee might be good! Yeah, coffee! Ah, Aion might not want that. Maybe some tea. I remember making some before the pizza came. Her personal supply should be enough. It was pretty flavourful. Plus if she needs some extra sugar… I can feel my face get hot. Blushing over tea. This is where I am now huh? This is my life and I'll do everything I can to protect it.

I go back to the potatoes and flip them, they're starting to gain that golden glaze. They look good. A few more minutes and they'll be ready to go. Tea. I should get some water. Kettle. Where's the kettle? With the other dishes, but which cabinet? Cups. Where did I set the cups? I pull the cabinet door open and stare at all the glasses. Found those. Now my kettle is… Ah, above them. All the way up top. I can barely reach it! What was I thinking, setting it so high up?

Alright, I can get the water started. Oh, the potatoes. I turn my attention back to them, flipping them all over as best I can. I think they'll need another minute, which gives me enough time to start heating the water and preparing the tea. Let's see, what else do I need? Maybe a little salt and pepper. A bit on the top. There it's perfect. I pick the skillet up and turn it a little bit towards me, pushing the potatoes up with the spatula. I tip them over the top and onto the plate with the bacon, yeah that's good. After getting them out of the skillet as best I can, it's finally time to get the eggs! Taking two out of the carton, I crack them on by one on a flat surface and let them drop into the remnants of the oil. They'll cook quickly since the skillet is already hot. Maybe 30 or so seconds on each side. I flip them and quickly move to pull the tortillas out of their plastic. Everything is good, now how are my eggs.

Done! Get those onto the plate. Yeah, this is good. Now the tortillas. Tongs, tongs, where are they? Oh, in the drawer here. I'll let them sit over the heat for a few seconds and good. Now one flip

and it's perfect. I grab a second plate and set it down next to the first. I place the first tortilla down and start heating the second one up. With a spoon, I grab a couple of bacon slices and rip them up, spreading them across the wrap. Now the potatoes. I push some of the potatoes down into the wrap and finally, the egg. I do the same with the second tortilla and wrap both of them up to make the burrito. This'll be great! I'm sure Aion will appreciate having something to eat after the day she had yesterday.

I stare into the living room and spot Aion sitting on the couch. She yawns loudly. Oh, she's already up! That's surprising but I'll be able to get her meal to her quicker! I grab a cup and pour in some tea for her. Oh yeah, it's all coming together now. We have a bit of time to sit down, catch up, and relax. At least until Chrono returns. Did he say what time? I can't remember. Well, when he shows he shows. I pick up both plates, balancing them on one hand then grab Aion's tea with my other hand.

"Hey, Aion. How was your sleep? Feel ok?" I ask her. She lets out another mighty yawn and stretches her body out like a cat.

"Hey. Still a bit tired but the breakfast smells travelled all the way up to my room and pulled me down." I set breakfast down on the coffee table in front of the T.V. and stare at Aion. She approaches me, wrapping her arms around me.

"It was savoury that lead me down here but that sweet scent of yours is what keeps me around." She whispers into my ear. Oh goodness that was very good yes I like it ahem I need to we need to…

"LEAF JUICE! HOT AND FRESH TO ORDER!" I exclaim. I split away from her and point at the tea I had made earlier. She quietly laughs and wanders over to it. I smile at her as she grips the cup.

"Aha… AHAHAHAHAHA! MORRIGAN!" Aion's burst of laughter confuses me. What the?

"What's up Aion? What's so funny?" I stare at her bewildered. Did…is there something on my

face?

“This is cold, Morrigan! Has this been out long?” My heart drops. How the heck did I forget? What the heck Morrigan! You dummy! I pinch myself on the cheek. Unfortunately, this isn’t a dream.

“Oh it’s fine, I’ll heat it up quicker than you can blink.” Aion winks at me and snaps her fingers. Next thing I know she’s sipping from the cup. I can see the steam radiating from it. Control over time is a pretty nifty thing.

“What got you in the cooking mood?” Aion sets the cup down and grabs the burrito. I hope she likes it.

“Oh you know, you had quite the day yesterday. I wanted to treat you a little. Nothing like a homemade meal to make you feel at… home.” That was so dumb why did I say that oh my god she’s gonna think I’m such a dork ugh why did I…

“Oh nice! Thanks Morrigan.” She takes a bite and smiles.

“Oh this is pretty good! I might need another!” Aion takes another bite then sets it back down. Her smile returns to her face. God she’s pretty… and she likes it. I’m glad… that’s good. We turn the T.V. on for some noise and get to eating breakfast.

“Does it really taste ok? Do you want any more salt or pepper?” I ask.

“Nah it’s perfect like this. Just the right amount. I like it. Really!” She replies. That makes me happy. Happy enough to-

Pin Pon

“Ah…” I sigh.

“Right, our guest… I’ll go” Aion stands up after speaking.

“No, I’ll get it Aion. You finish up.” Aion. Nods at me and I smile. I’m not going to let her breakfast be interrupted. I can take care of things for a bit longer. I look back at Aion, she sinks

down into the sofa seat. I guess she's hoping to get into the discussion without having to look at *his* face too much. Despite everything that's happened lately, here she is, still throwing a fit over her brother.

"Aion. Our guests are here. Well just the uh… ahem, Chrono and our new friend Daphne." Daphne nonchalantly waves at Aion and takes a seat at our table. Chrono enters after her and shoots a backhanded peace sign at Aion. The silence is making me feel anxious. I should offer them something, get some sort of conversation started.

"Would either of you like something to eat or drink?" I reach into one of the cabinets and pull more cups out for them.

"Ooo, I want something really sweet! I've been craving sugar like crazy lately " Daphne rings out in a bright and cheerful voice. It has only been a single night since she at last revealed herself and her intentions and yet she's more happy than anyone else on this squad.

"Something really sweet for the missus. Alright and for you good sir?" I turn toward Chrono. He laughs under his breath. He reaches into his coat and pulls out a pack of cigarettes. Opening it up he pulls one out and places it in his mouth. Aion raises her head stares at him with murderous intent. He laughs again, significantly more quiet.

"A coffee. Black. Nothing special for me." As I begin making Daphne's sweet treat I watch Aion get up and walk over to the table. She rips the cigarette out of his mouth. I can't help but laugh.

"I don't want that disgusting smell in my house. Go do it somewhere else, somewhere later, somewhere without me nearby." Tossing it back at him, she scoffs and goes back to her seat, returning to her breakfast. Chrono stares back with a fascinated look on his face. Perhaps taken by surprise that Aion took the initiative to stop him. Or maybe he just couldn't help being shocked that Aion treated him so harshly. A little ice, a little sugar, a little spice and of course, everything nice, Daphne's drink shines in the morning light.

I return to the living room. I sense her incredibly frilly looking iced treat with whipped cream on top for sparks a few notes of envy within Aion. I go back to fetch the plain coffee for Chrono I had brewing. Aion's eyes travel over to me as I leave, the hints of melancholy tell me everything. I will need to make another magical and mysterious drink for her.

"So… I've got an idea. About where she is. Our beloved sibling." I can hear Chrono speaking. I look over at him and see him glancing at Aion, whose reluctantly turned around to face him. Daphne finishes up her drink and begins to lick the insides of the cup. I can predict I'm going to be making a third one of these in just a moment.

"Well, just say it. Why are you so casual about this you weirdo?" Aion, just completely disinterested in the routine Chrono seems to put up every time he speaks about something. Aion's frown however quickly turns upside down when I bring her a delightful iced treat inside of a cup. Daphne holds her empty cup up to me and smiles.

"More?" I ask her with a smile.

"Yes please!" Daphne hands her cup to me with a smile in return and I turn back around to concoct a third mystical drink.

"Well, then I'll get straight to the point. The End of Time. That's the most likely location for her. That city, town, whatever it was that we went to yesterday, doesn't exist. It's a big fake. But neither of us could tell since, I suppose in part, it being extensions of ourselves." A pause in his words lets him glance over at Aion, she's now giving her full attention to the developing situation.

"Ok, the End of Time. So what? How do we get back there? Cordelia dropped the moon, the old routes are gone. I don't have the ability to get their anymore. I assume you don't either." Aion asks slightly annoyed but curiously, nonetheless. It has been a long time since we were there. Ardor was our first home in a way.

"You're right. I can't return either but I do have an idea. Not through any simple means I'm

afraid.” Chrono picks up his coffee and takes a long drink. The heat of the drink doesn’t seem to be stopping him, or maybe some time magic cooled it down.

“We need some help. From a very dangerous creature.” Chrono’s words damage Aion’s facial expression into a more serious one. Even Daphne stops licking her cup to pay more attention to what Chrono is saying.

“In some far off areas of the universe are… how do I even describe them…” Chrono closes his eye and places his right index finger on his forehead, presumably to think. Them?

“Beyond the void. In a very far, lost corner of space. The Watcher. We need to find it and bargain with it.” With his eyes still closed, his deep voice echoes throughout the house.

Merely speaking the name of the unknown creature sent air as cool as frost and vicious as fire across the room.

“So you’ve seen this thing before?” I ask while returning with Daphne's second drink. Aion shifts her focus elsewhere, rubbing her hands on her arms. Guess I’m not the only one who felt that.

“Well, seen is a bit of a stretch. I’ve only heard rumours, nothing ever definitive.” Chrono replies. Daphne puts her face back onto the cup. This kid, she's already done and seemingly searching for more sugar to lick! She raises an eyebrow at Aion and Aion puts the drink further away in her other hand, much to the disappointment of the fishy girl. Cute.

“So what makes you think we can find one? Let alone cooperate with us?” Aion asks.

“Look… I have a hunch, ok? If time works out the way it should then we’ll find The Watcher.”

“You haven’t even explained what one is Chrono! What the hell is a Watcher?”

“How should I know I’ve never met The Watcher. They’re like cosmic horrors. But! Not bad ones! They’re, well like the name implies, they watch. They’re like mediums I guess? They maintain the balance.” Chrono replies flustered. Aion’s the only person who can ever fluster Chrono.

“A cosmic horror? You want us to visit a monster because you have hunch? Are you insane?” Aion shouts out after finishing her drink. She sets the cup down and stares straight at Chrono.

“Hey c’mon. Trust me on this Aion. This one should be different. I’ve seen it in the flow.”

“The flow of time?” Daphne speaks up, finally done with the cup seemingly lined with enough sugar to keep her occupied for the majority of the conversation.

“Yeah, this one has taken moves in this universe. You guys are out of balance right? The entire Ministry is practically useless. No offence.” Laughing awkwardly Chrono looks into the living room, perhaps hoping that his comment doesn’t earn him the ire of his current peers.

“He’s right. You Ministry dweebs are nothing like the ones back where I came from. Honestly, our Aion is a lot more…” Daphne’s sentence ends abruptly as the knifes from Aion’s eyes lay cleanly across her neck. She also awkwardly tries to find something to stare at. Her eyes land on me. I'm sure I'm carrying an intensely worried look on my face right now. Everything going on right now sounds distressing.

“And if it just kills us or drives us insane?” Aion asks. I begin to gather all of the cups from everybody to clean them.

“It won’t! Aion, trust me. I wouldn’t endanger you like this. I wouldn’t endanger any of you! This is the only option I came up with after scouring billions of records across time with my partner.” Chrono pulls out his phone and points at it, perhaps indicating that data is stored on his phone.

“I could not think of anything more dangerous than this Chrono.” Aion fires off at Chrono. They’re like cats and dogs, constantly at each other’s tails.

“Render onto Caesar what is Caesar's and God's onto God.” Chrono says. I sigh and try to think about everything we’ve talked about. Something, somewhere nobody has ever heard of is our last chance. I can't say that instills a ton of confidence in me but we will take it. We’ll take both shares.

“We will separate nothing. There is no Caesar here. Only Gods. There is no task here impossible for any of us.” I voice my opinion.

“I suppose when we meet The Watcher we shall find out!” He says, lifting his head up and smiling.

“Don’t doubt Morrigan, Chrono. She has my full support. Good or bad, whatever happens, we do it together.” Aion replies to him. She trust me. She thinks we can do it. We will do it!

“I’m glad you believe in me.” I reply Aion. Chrono turns toward her and stares, in slight shock. As if he was a little touched by our words.

“This is… ahaha. Aion, you are a lucky woman. You don’t know how nice you have it.” Aion slams her fist on the couch and begins to yell at Chrono.

“Oh shut UP! You don’t think I’m grateful? I love her!” Her declaration of her feelings was perhaps the most surprising thing said in that room. Daphne bounces in her seat, laughing and pointing a finger at Chrono. I can't help but letting out a light laugh and smile. The discussion ends there and Chrono goes out to his car, preparing for the incoming trip. Everyone goes off on their own, looking for what they might need to take on an inter-dimensional trip through space and time. Our goal, to find something we had only heard about.

Awakening/6

The sound of metal separating from each other sparks wakes. Once again, I'm staring at the top of the metallic medical pod in the dungeon of the medical bay. Induced dreaming is horrifying but I can't deny its effectiveness. What a terrifying thing these Gods have invented. It's like an incredibly thorough VR training regimen. Footsteps approach me, my benefactor cut out the final bits of the show.

"So, how do you feel?" His sultry voice sounds exactly the same as it did in the dream. This technology worked seamlessly with the Dreamlands portal. Fortunately, it only works with me. Although I suppose if they make a new deal with a different beast they could do the same. Oh well, not like I can do anything about that.

"It worked flawlessly. I experienced her life." He beams a smile at me, happy to hear the experiment worked. I'm not sure if he intended to show me Morrigan's side as well or if that was done courtesy of Kassandra.

"That is fantastic news. Did you find out about her? Learn something new? Live a new life?" I ignore his questions. It felt more like a violation of privacy than anything, but again, what can I do? Her memories were much more intense than I had thought. The unknown woman. Their sister. Why hasn't she been mentioned? They know it was her. I don't understand why. No, I suppose this wasn't to learn about her. It was to learn about the previous Aion. I'll just ask.

"I am confused by something. Perhaps it was a glitch in the system, or the memory wasn't correctly recorded." I pick myself up and sit in the pod, dangling my legs below. I don't reach the floor so I have the small luxury of kicking my feet back and forth.

“A glitch? There was nothing that indicated as much in the data feed while I was observing. Can you describe what you believe was out of place to me?” He walks back towards the computer and starts clacking away at the keyboard.

“The villain, or my perception of the villain, was your Sister.. The antagonising seemingly behind the entire situation. What happened to her.”

“My sister? Aion?” He’s silent for a moment then claps his hands together and laughs. “Oh! I see! I’m sorry I hadn’t mentioned it to you earlier.” My ears perk up at the detection of new information.

“Yes, I’m very sorry. I couldn’t tell you before you started, I needed you to experience it in its most pure way. Things were different back then. Bad blood between family and all that. I’m much more interested in you living the previous Aion’s life however.” He sounds way too excited about this but, I need to supply the information that I have.

“Yes. I lived out her final days. I traveled across Aulis, the crater and we discussed this, Watcher character at the end.” The clacking noises at his computer intensify, this must be some sort of breakthrough.

“Excellent. You’re nearly fully prepared to fix the Timelines. This was really to catch you up Cass.”

“Right… You know, you were afraid too. Who could such a fearsome opponent be?”

“Ahaha believe me, you don’t want to see *her* on a bad day in person. When I think of *her*, I only see *her* scowl!” He laughs at himself and turns the chair around, staring back at me. That didn’t answer my question at all.

“Alpha and Omega, you remember them right? Aion told you about them didn’t she?” He folds his hands together and sends me what I assume to be a reassuring smile.

“I wouldn't say remember but what of them?” I respond. His smile widens and I can hear him

chuckle.

"Yes well, as their name implies, they're the beginning and the end. They have two factors that were taken from you." My eyebrows raise but I'm not that surprised.

I was under for a thousand years as well, I expected to be experiment on the same way you were Cass.

"These two factors are the Gaze of AO and the Visage of AO. AO being Alpha and Omega. I'm sure I don't need to explain the name again. Anyways, their gaze drives people to madness and their visage adopts a form that hides their true body. The visage is whatever the viewer fears most. Furthermore, anybody who saw AO back then no longer has memory of them."

Interesting. There exists a humanoid creature that can possess cosmic abilities. I suppose it's not really human, just based on one. Replace the parts, not the creature…

"So you stole these from me and placed them in your mechanical cohort?" He nods at me but doesn't look worried about the fact.

"Technically yes, although neither are actually organic matter and before his death, the doctor thought it was a good idea to test it." What does Chrono mean? This isn't adding up.

Hey, ask him where Alpha and Omega are now if he's so buddy buddy with them.

When did you wake up?

A moment ago, I'm only slightly upset you awoke before I did.

Maybe next time.

"So, where are they now? Do you maintain contact with them or?" I ask Chrono. Kass, do you think we can trust him? This guy is super shady! Why was he there too?! There's too much we don't know.

Who cares, he has info and I'll take it. I want to knock over this other creature that believes it has authority over my power.

“I’m afraid it’s been a while since I’ve encountered AO. AO has their own facility so they have little reason to return here.”

“I see. Anything besides that then?” I ask another question.

“As a matter in fact, I do believe I have some useful information. AO should be stuck thanks to Aion. It may be best to ask Aion directly about that, she did cooperate with AO briefly.” He’s right, Aion would probably tell me all about it. We're going to set everything right. Fix everything. I have to.

“Thanks, I guess. I’ll ask Aion later then.” His smile takes up the entire amount of real estate across his face, that must’ve made him really happy. Words of kindness also hold strange power.

“Right, well that’s the job. Cassandra Watson, find Alpha and Omega’s. Bring them back here and reverse Aion’s plan. Got it?” He quickly sits back in the chair and swings himself around. The switches on the keyboard clack once again to compose the melody of his work. Chrono lifts his right hand up, he’s waving a folder from side to side.

“Chrono, what happened to them. Everyone who left that universe. What happened when everyone made it to The End of Time? You’re here after all. What about Daphne?”

“Hmm, what happened to them? That should be obvious.” He replies.

“Just…tell me.”

“Well I’m here aren’t I? And Daphne is in Atlantis with Althea.”

“And the other Aion? The Watcher? What happened?”

“The Watcher and Aion? We’ve been discussing them the whole time Cassandra.” His words hit me, and I realise what happened. At least I can guess who I’m going to be looking for. Why didn’t he let me see the end though? He’s hiding something isn’t he.

“But how? Did something go wrong? I don’t get it.” I respond.

“A story for later, I’m sorry. Here is all the information in both of their files. It also includes their

base looks. Maybe you'll get a glimpse of them before their visage covers them."

"I don't need it."

"What do you mean? This is critical information Cass, you…"

"AO is a monster just like me. You told me where to start. I'm within mission perimeters or whatever you were saying. I'm going back to Aion now. I'm doing this to fix the timelines. I'm going to fix the balance." I put my coat back on and exit the lab. I don't think he's telling us the truth Kass.

He's obviously hiding something from us and expects us to obediently work for him.

I can't pass up an opportunity to help fix everything though. To correct the sins of the innocent.

Render onto Caesar what is Caesar's and God's onto God?

He said that to them at the very end. What did he mean?

Maybe he's just a fan.

As a fan of Man or a fan of a God?

And here we are stuck between them, playing their tune.

Part Five- After One Thousand Years

"From your mightiest palaces to your filthiest prisons, the same animal occupies them all! Mortals and their delusions! This is the Gap between the *Divine* and the *Irreverent!"*

After One Thousand Years/1

"Will this place will be the one?" I ask her, poking my head over the railing of the bridge we're crossing. The view is drop dead gorgeous. It's a city in the sky. Peeking down below, I'm greeted by white, gentle, fluffy clouds that look like massive, inviting pillows. Not like the dark storm clouds that surround the Inverted Castle and Tintagel. Would that I have the time to jump into them, just for the sensation. Oh well. Next time. After fixing everything!

"It is this one, probably. I think." Aion points forward in the direction we are walking in. "This building coming up is where our original backups are stored. Nothing gets past the system, even if I may have said otherwise in the past." She says nonchalantly, like all of this isn't her fault. But, that's what makes Aion, Aion, right?

"You think or you know Aion? I'd like a little more confidence in your answer." I fire a response back at her. Will this actually make a difference? Chrono mentioned this is the method that will work but if that's true, why wasn't it done sooner? Why does he want me present if Aion can do it herself?And if Aion could do it herself, why doesn't she? So much I'm kept in the dark about but, if there's a chance to fix things, to cleanse her sin, I'll take that chance.

"We would have come here in the first place if I was sure. Coming back here is…" Quietly, uncharacteristically, she trails off into silence. She isn't actually certain? I stare at her as she

continues forward. Even after everything, she's still picture perfect to me. Anything less and she wouldn't be Aion right? Whatever it is that draws me to her, I feel like we're meant to be. Something is truly remarkable about Aion.

I follow her into the depths of the city, met by nothing more than the gales of the sky. How serene. Incredible, really. What secrets lie in the corners of each alleyway, away from me, from both of us? Each step we take makes a sound that echoes like we're in a well. An incredibly massive well where each step is an announcement of our arrival. From buildings higher up in the sky above us are clouds that flow down like water. Oh, it is water. I can hear the current running but that doesn't make it any less incredible. It looks so wispy and solid. It had me fooled. I should return my focus to the task at hand. It is pretty cool to see all of this though.

"This place is…" I rise in tone, hoping to find out more.

"It's like my… our cosmic egg. It's outside of time. I haven't been here in a long time. A long, long time." After clearing her throat, Aion turns to the right, walking towards a nearby building. I follow her. Is that why she seems unsure? She doesn't remember it very well?

The place she pointed out looks like every other building here. Big white cylinders encompass and surround it. The building has the selfsame material and look as every other building. Compared to the beauty of the sky, it's utterly unremarkable.

"A cosmic egg? Who's egg? You mean the Phantasm thing? Are we not actually in the sky?" I ask question upon question, seeking to satiate the thirst of my curiosity.

"Yeah, that's it. Although this one hasn't seen use in some time. I don't know if the owner is around anymore… but I know who runs it."

"Who runs it? Like…keeping day to day things and actions operating." I walk towards her; she stops right at the entrance, waiting for me.

"Yeah… a special Ministry member." She cooly replies.

“A special member? Like all the other special ones?” I reply in turn.

“Hah hah. Funny today aren’t you? Well this one is particularly unique. However, I’d prefer you not encounter this character so don’t you worry that empty head of yours.” I can hear the smile on her face. Rude.

“So what’s this place called?” She didn’t really answer any of my questions but I’ll let it slide this time. I can bug her later. We are on important business after all.

“This is *Leng.* The perfect fortress. Or perhaps the perfect cage…” She says with a hand sliding behind to her back, gripping her sword. If whatever Aion expects in here requires force, I'll match her. I also reach for my weapon.

Down my skirt, strapped onto my left thigh, I pull my M1911 up and out of the holster. An officer’s model. It does what I need it to. Plus it looks cool. It’s for concealed use. If I have to shoot it’ll be when I need to shoot. I grip the gun down by my waist, carrying it for such an event. I feel like I’m some sort of legendary hero carrying out a covert infiltration.

Aion pushes the door open and enters. I follow right behind her, taking peaks behind us to make sure there's nobody creeping along our backside. After checking, I look forward again towards Aion and the rest of the building. Unsurprisingly, it’s empty. Hollow. This place exists outside of time so it’s not unreasonable to think that we’re alone but Aion took caution for a reason so I will too.

“Cass. Keep quiet. Keep calm. We may be lucky on our trip and not run into anything. But if anything, and I mean anything is waiting for us up ahead, wear this.” She hands me a ribbon, oh wait, this is her ribbon, she took hers off. Her hair falls down. It’s so pretty. She's definitely the type of girl who has a whole sort of character shift when her hair is down. Oh my! It’s bloody! Aion what the… Did she cut herself? Her sword is securely nested once more on her back.

“That will identify you as Aion. Without it, you’re an unidentified life form, you’ll be terminated on sight. But since I gave you a part of myself, you’ll be fine. Wrap it around like I do and just to be

extra safe, don't say anything. Don't touch anything. Just be. You're hiding in plain sight. Oh, and put that thing away. You certainly aren't a real match for whatever is here." She looks down at my gun and I feel my face get hot. How am I embarrassed in this situation. I can't look uncool in a situation like this.

Fangirling over your former boss?

Shut it!

"W-well I beat you didn't I? Maybe you should recognise me a bit more!" My quip fires back and she quietly laughs. That's not as the result I was hoping for. Aion adjusts her hair and wraps it up in a bun. Her silence speaks for her as she continues on forward. I stare once again at her backside as her silhouette shrinks. I suppose I should listen to her. Since she emphasised this so much, I should follow her rules.

Wrapping the bloodied ribbon in a ponytail with my hair, I can't help but think what bizarre things might be waiting for us ahead. I turn my head to the right and happen upon a monitor, something on it shows up.

"At the convergence of the "Depths' Potencies, a guiding force will lead the final frontier, welcoming all to observe. Time draws near."

The message vanishes and the monitor fades to black. A few moments later a single word shows up. It's written in gold and silver colours. It starts moving around the screen, bouncing on the edges of the TV when it hits them.

Leng

"Aion? The TV, what was that message?" I ask.

"Shh! What did I just tell you man? No. Talking." Aion rolls her eyes and starts walking ahead of me. Ugh, whatever. Fine, I'll be a good girl.

Walking past the curious monitor, I follow Aion into more curious, dark, hollow halls. It looks

like a TV station, without all the people of course but that message is strange. I'm too curious for my own good. Aion you know this! Continuing on with slight reluctance, we pass several empty rooms full of electronic equipment. Who knows how long they've been dormant. I can only imagine the manpower it takes to run such a place. And this is just a single building, every building in the place could look just like this, full of information and data that spans generations, centuries, civilisations, and the stars themselves.

"We're nearing the area we want Cass. The basement. We'll find what we need down there." Aion says facing me, before turning back around and heading towards a sign indicating where the staircase is.

"But how will we know when we find it?" I whisper in my most quiet whisper. Only the most sensitive of ears could pick up on that!

"Each Ministry member is assigned to a specific corner here. As powerful and enigmatic as we are, we're but footnotes in the span of the universe. Even Cordelia who represents space has a small section. There is a lot that goes on here, try not to comprehend the incomprehensible, it exists outside of your line of thought." Begrudgingly, I agree. I bet I could understand it Aion. I understood you after all.

"How does someone who ended the universe, not get sectioned off somewhere… I don't know… a bit more secret or locked up." My whispers cling to the dull, stale air of the staircase as we descend.

"There's a lot worse out there than I Cass. I'm small dent in the scale of everything. Just look for a square box. A blue square box, it's kinda small. No I mean, it's a cube. No that's not right either. It's called a Tesseract. It's a cube made of cubes.It's a four-dimensional object, try not to stare at it, you literally can't comprehend that either. Not that you could hope to try, the third and fourth dimensions can't interact." Aion reaches the bottom and stops, either waiting for me or anticipating

something ahead. What an incredibly interesting sounding device… box… thing that I can't comprehend? Like I wouldn't take the chance to study something that incredible?

“A blue cube made of cubes. Ok, what’s it called again?” I peek my head around as I reach the bottom of the staircase. She ignores me. The hall opens up to another hall and in that hall are five distinctly coloured doors. Each is lit up in a different colour. They must represent a few of the members.

“If you can’t tell, my room is the one with the blue lighting. It’s only blue on the outside however.” Aion continues forward, pausing for a few moments to stare at each door. I still don’t know what became of the other members. Her friends. Hell, I don't even know how mine are. I hope they’re all doing well.

“Are we going to run into aliens here?” I perk my head up with my question, wondering why despite being in the future, I haven’t encountered anything like them before.

“Aliens? What do you mean?” She asks me. Huh? What do I mean? What do you mean? Aliens are aliens Aion.

“Aliens? Like ET. You know, other beings from space?” I ask her again. She faces me with a confused look on her face. Slowly the veil of confusion begins to lift, and it looks like a moment of eureka hits her.

“Oh, I see. You call them aliens because you don’t have experience with them yet. Haha that’s interesting.” She answers.

“What? Don’t leave me hanging Aion, where or what are they? We’re in the future, the end of time, surely there’s something more here than humans.” I'm so curious now.

“I hate to shatter your fantasy but there’s no such thing as aliens or unknown creatures like that. In the strictest sense, they’re just humans.”

“Humans?” Now the veil of confusion covers me.

“Yeah like, certain eras of humanity go out to travel space, time distorts between their entrances and exits and comparatively advances more for them. They gain variations, they evolve but they all share a common link back to humans.”

“Seriously? Th-that’s so boring!” I say in disbelief.

“Ahaha yeah sorry, nothing really mysterious about them. They’re just variations of your local home grown meat bags. Should’ve stayed ignorant.” I kick my feet into the ground, that was an awful tangent. I should’ve remained ignorant to defend my imagination.

“Right, so a blue cube. What’s it called? Does it have a name? Like a real name?” I keep my voice still quiet, hoping to disturb the air as little as possible. I don’t really sense any other form of life. No signs of life at all. There's just nothing to indicate as much. In fact, there’s only been evidence to support the lack of life here but Aion said to keep quiet.

“It's called the Tesseract. It’s a recording device. It’s the ultimate recording device. A divine automatic recording device. All the data stored there is basically life itself. It connects to the facility and supplies it with data. This place is really just a giant computer. Everything is either generated, destroyed, maintained, or monitored by the computer here. It's more like a bio-computer similar to the one Chrono keeps in The Witches House. I’ll give you the rest of the story later. I really don’t want to run into the boss of this place so let’s get looking. Go into my room, I’ll be in the others.” Aion starts moving the room immediately to our right, it’s green so I can only guess that’s Ceres’s. Across from that is the colour brown, Morrigan’s perhaps? Oh down the hall, it’s mix of colours clashing. I guess that’s Eris’. Next to Morrigan’s is blue so probably Aion's? At the end of the hall is bright orange. Maybe that’s Cordelia’s room. Well time to get to work. I’ll be looking for this Tesseract which is full of data that I can’t comprehend or whatever she was telling me.

Entering the blue door to her room, I’m greeted by a familiar sight. It’s Aion’s place back on Earth. I look around and see the kitchen to my left, bathroom hallway door on my right, the desk on

the right wall. Her bedroom should be at the end of the hall and the door to the balcony in front of me. Does this mean her room is a recreation of this room? Or is the one on Earth real and this one is the copy? In fact… I've open up the possibility of many things. Aion's origin. How Aion knows about this place? Does the rest of the Ministry know? Why was Aion so apprehensive about coming here? Why has she been so secretive here? I don't understand. I hope I can get some answers from her later.

Right, I need to find the box first. I slap my cheeks, returning my focus to the task I was given. If I were a fourth dimensional object in a phantasm at the end of time, where would I hide? I walk towards her bed and stare at it.This place is pretty cool. If only there was more time. Well if it's her room, then maybe its in her desk? Reaching for the lower cabinet, Aion's words quickly echo through my head. "Don't touch anything."

Well how the heck am I supposed to look for this thing if I can't touch anything. Does it count if my feet touch the floor? Aion, I did NOT receive enough information about this! Ok, reason this out, if I do touch something and in turn, something comes out looking for me, I'm currently Aion. I'm not sure how exactly but I'll be recognised as her. Just need to adopt her signature look of superiority. I'll be fine. I'm sure of it. Aion was pretty nonchalant about her actions, despite the heavy nature of them. Like she said, there's a lot worse in the universe. Even if she almost ended all universes. After that day… Aion and I…

Before I had realised it, I was pressing my hands on the desk, leaning on it. The monitor on her desk turns itself on. The display reminds me of the one I had come across earlier in that TV station-esque part of the building. It's a black void. I think the computer started up, I hear the faint sound of fans running. In a place as silent as this, I can hear everything. I look over at the entrance. I wonder if something will enter. What could show up? What manner of creature or… I hear a ding noise and my sights immediately shoot towards the monitor. I stare at it, bewildered by what appears.

The Beginning of The End/2

Slowly blanketing over me, gentle rays of light poke me, pulling my eyelids up and exposing my brain to the new day. I creek my mouth open, exhausted, exhaling, and dry. Slouching my head to the left, I feel a pillow shifting below me. My eyes shift upward, I stare at a wall. I slowly draw them across it realise I'm in a room. It's an empty, silent room. There's a window…or maybe it's a door. It's clear. Glass… I shift to the right. There's a… coat rack? It's holding something. The haze in my mind sits comfortably, drawing feelings of uneasiness. Blinking a few times, my vision corrects itself. I rub my eyes with both hands and feel a light sheet fall from underneath them. The warmth of my body refreshes me.

I pick myself up and sit over the side of my bed. I'm up against a wall, so only the right side is available. The floor is hardwood, smooth to the touch and bright. It's reflecting the light from outside off of it. I look back at the rack, my clothes are hanging off of it. Where am I? What happened? What brought me here? The usual questions in my head when I wake nowadays. I push myself off of the bed and look around at the room. It's mostly empty, save for a desk on the opposite side of the bed. There's a monitor sitting on it with cables escaping from the backside, presumably connecting to a PC. In front of me is a door, to the right of the door is the kitchen, at least I think it's the kitchen. There's a sink and a fridge, a cabinet on the upper left. Oh, another door to the left. I wander over to it, the cold imprinted upon the flooring sticks itself to me. I'm not wearing any socks or shoes. In fact… looking down I stare at my outfit. It's just a white button up shirt and nothing else. My shirt and underwear are all I need when sleeping. How, no, when did I go to bed? Was… did I have a bit too much to drink last night?

Putting my thoughts on hold, I reach for the door on the left. Opening it up leads down a dim

hallway with another door on the left side. Steeping into the empty hall, I walk towards the other door. Pushing the door open, it leads to a dark room. I rub my right hand up against the wall, looking for some sort of light switch. Feeling the grooves in the wall, I've found my switch and flip it. The illumination banishes the darkness. It's a bathroom. A neat, tidy and simple bathroom fitted with a sink, toilet and walk in shower. It's nice. Really nice. The vanity in here is flawless. Has to be something fancy. Bright white, perfectly clear. A perfect bathroom for the perfect person.

To the right of the sink is a towel rack, multiple towels in multiple sizes. From small washcloths to full size towels, everything I need to clean myself up. I turn to the sink and pull on both knobs, letting the water run to become a warm temperature. A mirror above the sink had been staring at me the entire time I was looking around. I look at my face, angling from right, centre, then left. I pull my index and middle finger up on both hands and press them into my face. I look real, I feel real, I think it's real. It's me.

I stare at the side of the mirror. Reaching towards it with my right hand, I pull on it's handle. It opens up to several rows of beauty products, soaps, toothpaste, a toothbrush, and even razors. I reach for a bar of unopened soap, I unwrap it and bring my hands down into the water. A comfortable temperature greets me as I begin washing my hands. I set the soap to the side and rub my hands together for a few moments before giving them a rinse. I pick the bar back up and fill my hands once more, bending over a little bit and then setting it back aside. I press my hands into my face and rub my cheeks, my chin, over and under my lips and finally my forehead. After cleaning up, I bring my hands back to the water and rinse them. Following that, I pool some water in my hands and splash it into my face, rinsing the soap off again. I reach for a washcloth and pat my face dry, looking back at myself in the mirror I can't help but be impressed. Beauty sleep works far too much for my own benefit. I set the washcloth back and reach for the toothpaste and brush. I continue my morning regimen, taking care of everything and cleaning the counter up as I finish. I

shoot myself a smile and walk back into the room. I sit at the desk and stare at the things on it. A calendar, a phone, a notepad and a pen. Pretty simple, although this phone is a bit old. Wired into the wall by a cord, there's an extremely basic interface on it and the message recorder controls on the right side.

キンコン

1 2	*キンコン* *キンコン*

#

キンコン

Oh! Is that the doorbell? I get up and walk to the coat rack, grabbing my skirt from it and slide it up. There we go, halfway dressed, should be ok…

I step towards the front door, or at least what I think is the front door and look into the peephole. Wh-what? What the hell is that! I pull the door open, it wasn't locked, to greet the creature standing outside.

“どうもうどうもう

How are you? I'm really glad you're awake! Did you rest well? Do you feel better? What do you think of your room? Did you find the facilities to your liking-usa?” She asks me. What was that little bit on the end that she said?

“I uh…USA? Huh? Like the country?”

“Wonderful-usa! No not the country silly! I'm a rabbit!” This girl… is a rabbit? A rabbit that looks human? A human with rabbit ears. That's not normal. Normal? After pushing me back a little and inviting herself within, she pulls her hands forward from behind her back. It's a clipboard with

some manner of paperwork on it. She begins to read what's on it to me.

“After extended deliberating, Chrono, Jove and Saturn have finally come to consensus. Your final examination will be a combat exam. Contingent upon successfully passing, will lead into the graduation of your studies. The approval comes from… let’s see here-usa…Your professors have all given full recommendations. The Ministry has also found your ability exceptional, with two of them giving you personal recommendations. If you give the approval, then I’ll inform the staff that you are ready to take the next step and prepare for the future-usa.” … The future? Recommendations?

“H-hey, hold on a second!” I reply to the news with the fog in my mind laying heavy once more. How did I end up here? Or…what led to me forgetting why I’m here?

“Did you have a question-usa? I’m certain that so much good news at once can be a little difficult to process.” She ends her sentence with a smile and…usa.

“Uhh…th-thank you! I have no questions. I will proceed with the exam in that case. Please let me know more when the time comes!” Bowing my head to her, she bows in return. Perhaps it would be best to just go with the flow for the time being, get my bearings before trying out anything. Graduating right? You graduate from schools so…I’m enrolled in school?

“Understood-usa! I will inform the administration posthaste! Thank you for your cooperation. I shall be in contact with you when more information is released. Take this sheet here.” She pulls a piece of paper out from the back of the clipboard and hands it to me. “Have a nice day~” She turns around and bolts out of the door at the speed of light!

Alright… alright… Where was I? I really need a minute here. Heading back into my room I take another look at everything around me. A combat test. So a fight against someone? I stand over my desk, leaning on it and staring down at the monitor. How odd. It feels familiar, like a wave of nostalgia is splashing over my face.

I pull the sheet of paper up and read it over from the top. A blue mark is at the top of the page, I

wonder what it's for.

“You have been formally selected for Graduation Aion. In light of your outstanding aptitude and faculty recommendation, please look over the following information to ensure it is correct. Proceed to the indicated location when you are called upon for your exam.

Ministry of Interuniversal Affairs Adjudication: Name: Aion.

Designation: Time

Council for Observance and Protection of Earth:

Name: Thanatos. Designation: Death”

Aion? Is that me? And the fellow below me, I have to fight in the combat exam? Death?

“Uh that’s me. The Illest Death, the Grimmest Reaper, the Palest Rider, the biggest A on the biggest D, the Shinigami, the Psycho fucking Pompus. Best put some motha fuckin RESPECT on my name bitch!” He flips me off with both hands and proceeds to throw his feet over the table and pushes himself back into his chair. This guy is outrageous. The track jacket, all the gold chains around his neck, rings on rings around his fingers. Where did they get this guy? Is he serious?

“And Thanatos, you’ll be up against… The Ministry's recommendation: Time, Aion.” The woman speaking turns away from us and walks to the back of the room. She starts shifting some papers around. Wait…what?! I... the… where’s my room? Huh? HUH? Dazed and confused, I look around the room and stare at the people inside. Wasn’t I… staring at my desk? Wait? My desk? Wasn’t it…? The voice from before breaks my train of thought.

“This will be a battle that is not in your favour Aion. On the other side however, will be a battle most simple for Thanatos. Your final test is to best each other, by any means necessary.

The winner will graduate and formally move onto their duties, the loser will be liberated from the sphere. Good luck to you both.” The slim woman exits the room. It's almost fight time. This room doesn't look like it's fit for that. It’s… kinda like an office. A few chairs, some cubicles on the sides.

A couch and a big TV. This is so strange. Oh! I didn't even notice the windows, that's a nice view of Leng.

"I don't need no luck! Luck needs me. Oh and by the way babe, I gotta lotta shit to do when I finish so let's make it easy huh? Just let me win." The male voice speaks up.

"Huh? Let you win? W-why would I do that?" I reply.

"Because bitch! I got shit to do! Weren't you listening? You don't know how busy a mf is! Dreams riding on this and shit!" This guy is really something else! What a tool! Who is he kidding? Dreams? He dresses like a clown and has all the ambition of the circus? What is with all these rings and chains? So indulgent!

"Despite what we were told, I assure you, I will not be losing this fight. I have a lot riding on this too! My mentor would never…"

"Never what? That bitch don't know shit either. Y'all messin' with a mf force of nature!" He strides towards me, his head held high, a gross grin plastered on his mug. Boy I sure would like to slug this creep right now.

"Tell you what. I'll even let you be my first bitch. You can watch me rise to greatness cus I'ma bout to take the whole universe by storm!" His says. His voice is pissing me off.

"You inconsiderate, complete fu-"

"Would both contestants please make their way to their respective rooms. They have been assigned to you based on colour. Your colour is on your Exam Certification sheet from your guarantors. You may take any tools, weapons, and devices that you believe will assist you in your examinations. Again, would both contestants please make their ways to their respective rooms." My response is cut short by the announcement.

"Shit… Ay what color you got?" He looks at me with a confused look on his face. How the hell does this guy dress himself in the mornings?

“Blue…” I reply. I should’ve told him to fuck off but whatever. Let’s just get this over with so I can meet back up with my mentor. Hmm, strange. Why can't I recall her name?

“Aight, cool. Well, see you in the ring then. So I can show everyone that you a has been. PEACE!” He turns around and heads out the same door that the woman from earlier did. What did I do in my past life to deserve this? If I even have past lives, surely I don't deserve this. Well, guess I should head to my room too. Not like I need to bring anything. My sword just kinda materialises? I’ll be fine. I don’t lose fights.

I settle into the room I was instructed to. Another empty, silent room with nothing other than a few chairs and a couch. Empty rooms seem to be a trend here. Well, no point in focusing on it when I’m about to do the exam. He’s Death right? So he probably uses a scythe or something. Maybe he can summon skeletons to fight for him. Would that be cheating? He has to fight on his own right? Right. Hmm what else…

“60 seconds to doors opening. 60 seconds.” The announcement echoes off of the walls in the hollow room. A minute. In a minute I’ll be fighting that loser. I’ll just mess with him a bit then knock him out. Or maybe I should beat him quick. Would that earn me a higher grade? The door to the testing grounds opens up. Well, no more time for thinking. I’ll pass the exam then evaluate this weird day I’ve been having afterwards. I step out of the prep room, confident in my ability to beat this loser and move on.

The corridor is as long as it is silent. Guess there’s no crowd to witness my perfect performance. No audience means no one to show off to. I’ll make this quick. No point in dallying. The hall opens up to an arena. A giant dome with a ceiling staring down at me. Oh, I can see the woman from earlier and that rabbit girl is standing next to her. There's a third figure, next to both the girls. I can’t make their face out though. This person is strangely blurry. Is my vision off? In that split second, I took to consider if something was wrong with me, the sound of the air being sliced travels into my

ears! A huge scythe is flying towards me! I freeze the world around me and step to the side. How dirty! He just came out guns blazing? I resume the flow and stare at the scythe that's now firmly stuck into a part of the wall behind me. What an insane first move!

"Thought that'd get ya. Oh well. Next one'll finish ya." He leaps upwards into the air. What an incredibly high leap. Landing by his scythe, he picks it up and starts spinning it around his body. Despite of the size of that thing, he's wielding it with no struggle at all! Ugh what a pain. The guy looks like a loser but is actually good at what he does. Why is this a trope? I hate it! And he rhymed a word with the same word? That's lazy!

"Best get your bony ass out of the way Aion, or your gonna get exposed like a mothafuckin' phony! Ahahaha damn it feels good to be out here!" He ends his sentence with more laughter, swinging the scythe at me. His slices are precise and calculated. Every swing he does feels like a test. But even so…wait… My ass is bony? What the hell?! H-hey!

ズット

The scythe executes the air right in front of my face, sending shivers down my spine. A second. That's all it took. A single second to inject that fear into me. Alright, I'll start taking this seriously now. As a matter of fact, there's no reason to play fair if he won't. I'm going to throw my style into the mix and see if he can keep up!

"Enough! Let's see you dodge this pretty boy!" Snapping with my left hand, I summon my blade and freeze time. He'll never see it coming. Sorry it has to end so melodramatically man. But I need to get the heck out of here and find out what's going on!

In the quiet and empty world, frozen by time, *I* am its master. This is *my* domain. And I'm going to *claim* what is mine!

"Hyaa" I shout at the top of my lungs. Pulling my arm backwards, I set up a quick and straight forward hit. I'll even spare you by hitting a non-lethal area, just so your story doesn't end here.

You’re a chatty guy, you can talk it out with the staff members. I move into my slice, dealing the blow that will get me my answers

“Ah, so that’s the nature of time. No wonder she said this would be simple! Ahahaha your trick is easy to beat, so stand still and admit defeat!” Thanatos moves his arm upward, swinging his scythe. It deflects my sword. He… He broke free! How? I-impossible!

“Now let me give you my grand speech about how I got around your trick. You see, I’m Death. The motha fuckin one and only! And before you get out your next breath, lemme tell ya. Well we all got expiration dates baby, some sooner than others. You freeze time, I spit a rhyme. I killed the time you froze and now it don’t exist. So don’t even try n persist, cus you just got a cease and desist. Welcome to my hood. Know what’s good?” He brings his scythe back down and I jump back as fast as I can to escape the attack.

“I’m impressed. Never seen someone live after I froze time. Guess someone down there’s got your back.” I take this moment to catch my breath. Even if he freed himself, I need to stay calm. Don’t show weakness for a second. He seems to be the type that catches on quick. If he senses these nerves, this fight will be over.

“Thanks for the compliment baby, I knew I’d get that sweet side to show. Now howsabout I show you my trick, as thanks for you showin’ yours?” His grin widens, a toothy smile travels towards me as he slams his scythe into the ground. “Lets get tha fuckin’ party started yeah!”

The area around him cloaks in a dark spiral. Black mist surrounds his body and the air in the area loses its warmth. What’s happening? Instantly, he flies out at me. I'm not able to see time around him move! My brain is just barely keeping up with what happened. Out of instinct, self-preservation, my ability activates. Time is frozen. I leap away to dodge the hit. He knows he has the upper hand, he's making me run away from the encounter. His scythe slams into the ground, the arena visibly shaking from the power behind the impact. He got stronger?!

Picking his body up, he stretches himself out. His chains, rings, everything flashy vanishes. A deep, dark black cloak materialises over his body. It's absorbing the light around him. His hood is up, hiding his face but within, bright red eyes stare out at me. The ground around him changes. He has his own aura. Blood red mist trickles up from below him. He's certainly more fearsome than the weirdo who started this fight.

"Aahahahaha. Just in the nick of Aion. Time ain't no slouch huh? But that luck ain't gonna carry you forever. And I'll see to it!"

"See to it? Heh… Can you see this?!" I freeze time once again and speed towards him, sword in position to swing into his left side. Even if he breaks free, he has to react, and when he does, that's when I'll go in! I slash into him, as hard as I can, hoping that I get his attention.

"Ha! Another cheap trick! You don't seriously think you'll stop me with that little stick!" Once again, he moves in my frozen world, killing the time I stopped but that's fine! It's perfect! Because now your other side is wide open! His scythe predictably swings to the left. The blade skims across my face. It's a close call, but one I have to take.

Tossing my blade into my right hand, I move with swiftness and precision to strike at his right side. If I get through the rib cage, this fight will be over! I push and push, waiting for his expression to change as my blade contacts his robes.

"J-just a bit more!" I yell out as I force the blade into him.

"You're a fool! This fight is dictated by my rule! Didn't ya see ya boi swingin' this thing around? I'll put you into the ground!" He shouts. I push my sword into the right side of his chest, hoping that I can close the gap between us.

"Aahahahah. There it is! Proof you're no match for me Time Bitch!"

His hands grip his scythe and he sweeps me off of the ground using the flat side of the blade and then throws his arms up. The move shoots his weapon skyward. It travels from left to right, in a

circle like a full moon. Anything and everything in the area makes the cut. I stare in disbelief as my right arm is flung into the air. No different from tossing a doll across the room. My arm falls back to the earth as a limp, lifeless piece of meat. I leap back and immediately fall to my knees. I stare at the carmine ground, painted by a fresh specimen.

My mind is starting to blank, I'm injured. Beyond injured. That was my fucking arm! Energy is expending from my body rapidly, trying to make sense of what happened and where the fuck its arm just went.

"You ready to lay it down? Ya lost to the man replacing Lady Death, ain't no shame in that. You just don't got that flame." He smirks at me, picking his scythe back up and setting it over his shoulder. Well, guess that's it. Whatever happens to loser will happen to me. Upsetting as it is to fail, at least I won't live to see that. Shutting my eyes I let go, drifting back into the dark, into nothingness.

The silent, empty dark of the universe surround me. Did I already die? I stare out into the abyss, awaiting my judgment. I stare into the void, all consuming, all dark, all empty. It's sad. Lonely. This is so unlike me. How did that all happen so fast? Is this where it ends? I lost? To HIM? I stare and stare and stare and stare stare and stare and stare and stare and stare stare and stare and stare and stare and stare stare and stare and stare and stare and stare stare and stare and stare and then I see me. I'm there. Slashing something. Left and right. Swords in both hands. Moving so freely. Stripping the time back and moving it forwards. Elegantly dodging every attack while landing every one of my own. She's beautiful. She's flawless. She's perfect. It's me. I'm her.

I turn around and stare at my foe. He's there, ripples of black, red and pink radiate from his body. He's a proud person. Strong and true. Death chose him. He made it all the way here. He's full of life, despite representing the opposite. And he ended up here, to follow in the footsteps of his mentor. Opposites were we? Behind his facade… He's just a normal guy. His ups. His downs. His

successes and his struggles. Admirable. But I shouldn't need worry, he'll be fine.

That's him. That's who he is. And that's the difference. I'm perfection. He's ambitious. I'm flawless. He's flawed. Yeah… yeah that's what I am. I see it now.

"You just forgot one very, very, simple thing Thanatos." I say.

"Wh-what's that bitch?" He replies.

"You still need to follow the rules. Stopping me in the moment means nothing."

"I-in the moment? You sayin' I finish quick?"

"It's beautiful. Truly beautiful. The spiral mix of reds, pinks and black. Your origin is a sight to truly behold. Life gives, death takes."

"What the fuck are you talking about you crazy bitch? My origin. Origin deez nutz." He leaps at me from above, his form immaculate. His determination, commendable. Good. Fantastic work Thanatos, you really are the best creature I could've faced. I understand why they made me face you. This is why I will pass and you will fail. You took me to the very edge. Let's enjoy this to the fullest!

"Unfortunately for you. I'm perfect." I snap my left hand and let the magic happen.

"Shut up. Shut the fuck up! This is over!" He crashes into the ground; his rage shakes the world itself. Whatever he wants from winning, he's willing to kill to get it. Unfortunately, you had to go up against me. Perfection.

"It's like you said. I'm the time bitch. But I prefer Goddess. The Goddess of Time that is. Stopping it isn't the only thing I can do; I can push it forward and backward. Time exists by my design. Just because you can stop the push, doesn't mean you free yourself from it's pull!" Ripping time back, I take us back to the beginning of the fight. My arm returns, he loses his origin form. But I go back with all the knowledge, and he doesn't.

"Best get your bony ass out of the way Aion, or your gonna get exposed like a mothafuckin'

phony! Ahahaha damn it feels good to be out here!" He continues his sentence into laughter, his slices still, precise, and calculated. But even so…wait…Ah…here we are. Back again. I'll make quick work of this.

"Sorry man. You can't turn back time. That's my field. Hope that scythe can double as a shield!" I shout.

I snap with both of my hands. In them now appear two blades. A tick to my tock. I suppose my control grows with possession of both. Clocks don't really work with just a single hand huh? I play the scene forward, skipping time and everything he would've seen. Kicking him down to the ground, I get on top of him and lay my blades across his neck like a pair of scissors.

"Surrender. Now. Or I'll send you back to your boss in a bag." I stare into his black eyes; they're wrought with fear. Looking everywhere but at me. His breathing is irregular, he's shaking. Honestly it's a little satisfying, knocking him down a peg. His heart has admitted defeat, now just say it.

"W-when did… Nobody told me you could d-do this… MAN

FUCK

YOU WIN ALRIGHT

Don't…kill ya boi."

Thanatos puts his hands up and sighs. His admission of surrender causes a door to open up behind us and an image flashes in my mind.

"Cass…Hey…Cass? Cass? Cassandra, are you there?! I think I can finally get to you."

My head… I have an awful headache right now. Where did that voice come from? I open my

eyes to an empty white room. This is different from where I was. Now that I think about it, this sort of thing always happens to me. Annoying.

"Cass, are you there? It's me." Kass? I look to the left and right, trying to find the source of her voice. There's nothing around, should I just, speak aloud? Well, better than running around headless.

"Kassandra? Where are you? What's going on?" I check above my head, nothing. I look below, more nothing.

"Finally, I got through. You fell asleep! Not any normal sleep either, the state you're in is like the dream inducer we used before."

"Sleep? Dream inducer? What's going on?" I ask.

"I've unlocked a treasure trove of information since you've been away. But before that, listen to me, it's a trap. All of it. You're in danger. You've been in danger the entire time you've been here!"

"What?! What is it? just say it!"

"Cass, Morrigan is in the facility!"

"Morrigan? What? When did she arrive?"

"While you've been dreaming here, I could feel someone enter the room. It felt just like her presence."

"Ok… So? What's unusual about that?"

"Cass, Morrigan didn't join you two. Did you already forget?."

"No, you're right. Sorry I've had a lot going on in this dream. Ok, so that means the one that showed up is..." I slowly start to unravel the situation.

"When?! When did you notice?!" I shout frantically. I'm in danger. I'm in serious danger without control of my body.

"I need to wake you up! Right now!"

"Kassandra? Hey wait! Kassandra!?" My shouts echo within the comfort of silence that returns

to the area. She said she'll wake me up. Does that mean I'm going to need to fight Morrigan? No not Morg… AO… I don't know when. I don't know how. Apparently they've had the upper hand on us the entire time I was here. I might have already fallen under the visage of AO. I might not recognise that fact when I wake up. They could be anybody now. Anyone of us…

Lying from You/3

“Cass.” A woman's voice calls my name.

“Cass?” Another woman's voice?

“Cass!” A third woman's voice?

“Cass. Wake up stupid!” Aion's rude voice...

The various voices calling out to me sends shivers down my body. My heart drops into my stomach. I feel like I've woken up late for something important.

“Hey, you finally wake up? I told you not to touch anything and here I find you sleeping on the job.” Aion spits out at me.

“Aion, you don’t need to yell at her. It’s your fault we’re all here anyways.” A gentle, airy voice replaces the harsh words from Aion. Is that… Ceres right? That voice is unmistakable. I rub my eyes and stare at the cast of voices that called my name. This is a collection of faces I haven't seen in a long time. But where did they all come from?

“How many times did I tell you not to touch something? And of course the first thing you do is touch something. I should’ve just left you here for eternity.” Aion says, staring at me with a scowl. How unbelievable! Yelling at me already for something I had no control over to begin with! I pick myself up out of the chair I apparently sat down in to take a nap. I walk away and approach the others. Ok, this is fine. You can do this.

“What do you mean?! You didn’t establish rules for what can be touched and what can’t be its not my fault! How was I going to get what we came for if I couldn’t touch it?” I speak up, raising issue with what Aion said.

“Are you dumb? What does “Don’t touch anything.” mean to you Cass? Unbelievable.” She

replies as if I'm annoying her. Why am I being treated like a kid right now? It's her fault not mine! Staring at the door, I watch it creek open. Is that…

"Oh, hello. Is everyone accounted for now?" That's certainly the unmistakable representation of War herself, Morrigan. I take moment, recollecting my thoughts and try to catch back up on everything that's going on right now. I stare at Morrigan, then at Aion and looking past her I can see the other Ministry members. Eris, Ceres, and Cordelia. They're chatting with each other but, I do take notice of them all periodically shooting glances at Aion. Oh that's right! These three girls have been missing! I never ran into them when returning from the End of Time with Cassiel. Hmm so does that mean they were… actually what does that mean? Aion never had run into any Ministry member during this adventure. Were they here the whole time? Did something happen to them? Well, better to just ask. It seems like all the girls are on decent terms. Or they were waiting for me to wake up so they can drag Aion and I to the gallows.

"H-hi guys… how's the uh… things… lately?" I stretch an uneasy smile across my face. I hope we're on friendly terms. I mean, I, didn't do anything to you guys.

"Right as rain, returned from her slumber. Significantly shorter than ours, however. Isn't that right Aichi?" Cordelia speaks up. It feels like it's been forever since I've heard her cheery, bubbly voice. Aichi? Is that her nickname for Aion?

"Congratulations Cassandra! You beat Aion, the biggest jobber in The Ministry. Fantastic work." Ceres speaks to me with her ever-gentle tone. Did she just roast Aion? Oh god! I draw my eyes across the room at her, Aion's shaking. She's mad huh? Really mad. What possessed her to say that?

"Oh that? It was so long ago, I mean, who can say at this point who really beat who? Heh Sorry, for dozing off here and wasting all of your-"

"I am NOT A JOBBER! SHE…SHE CHEATED…SHE'S A HUGE CHEATER!" Suddenly, Aion interrupts me with some shouting of her own, I guess that didn't sit well with her.

“Ok, ok, Aion. This inexperienced time traveller beat the Goddess of Time herself because she cheated. If that’s what helps you sleep at night fufu…” Aion experiences interruptions herself when Ceres cuts her rant short. That laughter is going to live rent free in Aion’s head for months. Ahahaha…it’s nice. This is nice. This is normal. We’re getting back to normal.

“So anyways…where were you all at hmm? Oh, that’s right. I already beat the rest of you!” Aion poses a question to all of the other girls. Each Ministry member snickers then walks towards Aion.

“H-Hey ladies! C'mon! I already apologised! It doesn’t have to be like this. Wha!?” Her talking is interrupted as she begins to receive an onslaught of tickles and pinches across her body. Man that’s a lot of tickling. She falls to her knees, laughing and laughing. I don’t think I’ve seen Aion make a face like that in a thousand years!

“Ok, ok, ok. Alright! I’m sorry! Really, I am. At least thank Cass for saving you guys.” Saving them? What did I do to save them?

“Right, Cass! Hey wazzup! Thanks for stopping Aion and all that. She blindsided all of us!” A voice speaks up. One I’ve sorely missed and gladly welcome. Eris sends her attention my way as the other girls back away from Aion. Although interestingly enough, Morrigan stays behind, helping pick Aion up and they start whispering to each other. Morrigan is the only member I met with after leaving the lab. Well there’s Chrono but I’m not sure if Chrono counts in any sort of official capacity anymore.

“Blindsided you guys? What do you mean?” I ask Eris as my focus returns to her question.

“See, Aion mentioned that you shouldn’t touch anything right?” She replies.

“Right.” I answer.

“When we first arrived, we were told these are our rooms and to rest up for a Ministry meeting here in Leng.” Eris explains. I nod my head and look at the other girls. They all nod similarly and then stare at Aion and Morrigan who are still whispering to each other.

“Uh yeah well… It was a trick. I knew I couldn’t take on four Ministry members at once, not to mention that others might’ve shown up too. So I decided to enlist some help.” Aion speaks up. That’s an eyebrow raiser. Help from who? Does she mean that person? The one Chrono mentioned?

“Who did you work with Aion?” I quickly fire the question at her, hoping that she’ll answer truthfully in front of the other girls.

“Alpha Omega “ The name echoes through the room. AO? So it is like Chrono said. The room sits silent as everybody absorbs the information. I hate admitting I don't know a ton about the other girls. I feel so out of place amongst them. Or maybe it's more like I've yet to experience working with them in depth since we’ve all been sidelined for awhile.

“What? You worked with AO?! I thought your whole deal was that you wanted to free yourself of burden, not owe yourself to them Aion!” Eris finally breaks the silence and my thought process along with it. But she is right. Aion did state several times that she was breaking the cycle. There’s a contradiction in her actions.

“I know. I know. Just… give me a second to explain." Aion’s hand slips by Morrigan’s. They’ve been awful close since entering. I’m gonna need some answers from these two later.

“The current purpose of this facility is twofold. Specifically this area which we call Leng is to safeguard the Automaton’s that record all Ministry members actions. The second is to seal the Ministry members away in events of extreme danger. Dangers being threats to order and chaos.” Aion explains. Threats to order and chaos? So something like hiding them if they were targets of an attack.

“And sealing them away… helped your plan?” I press on with a question, partly satiating my own age-old question of why nobody stopped Aion before things got out of hand.

“Yes. With AO’s assistance, I successfully had everyone in this room blindly walk into a trap. You just had a taste of that trap Cass. That’s why you were asleep at the desk when we found you.

All you have to do is touch a single thing in the room. Computer, desk, walls, light switches, beds, anything. Once you touch it, AO takes care of the rest."

"Takes care of the rest? How?" I ask.

"Well you've already experienced it. Eternal rest." Aion replies. Rest? But I was…I didn't feel like I was sleeping. It was more like… being spirited away or something. Maybe that's on account of two people being in my head though.

"And what goes on in that rest? I saw you Aion, or rather I was you. Fighting someone." Aion raises an eyebrow in interest and stares intently at me. My face feels hot. Why am I back in this position?! I'm the one who was wronged!

"You saw me? And you were fighting someone as me? Straighten the story out detective. Nobody was supposed to receive any sweet dreams. It was plain, boring old rest. Did any of you girls experience what Cassandra said?" She looks around at heads nodding left to right. W-what does that mean? Did I see something special?

"Explain Cassandra. What happened?" Aion's tone of voice demands of me. I nod my, agreeing to share my experience.

"Well… I was… you? I'm not sure when exactly but, you were at some sort of school, or maybe an academy. It was near graduation. You needed to pass a combat exam and fought… Who did I fight? This flashy, showoff, douchebag. He had a scythe and was rapping during our fight and…" I wander into my memories. No wait. That's not right. It was no memory of mine. What was it?

"Go on." Her cool, calm voice slips into my ears and I return my focus back to the explanation.

"My opponent was Thanatos but she was male here. Not like our Thanatos at all. He was so odd… and he sliced my arm off. In fact, he nearly killed me. He had every advantage over me, it was bizarre knowing that the power of Time was useless against him. I felt like I was done for but there was something pushed me back from the brink. I saw his origin, my origin and found a way

around his attacks by cutting through time."

"You fought against a different version of Thanatos?" She asks

"Yeah. He was something. Taught me how to…" Cordelia raises her hand, interrupting me.

"Hold on. Taught you? What did you learn Cass?" Cordelia speaks up to the surprise of everyone in the room.

"I… well… I could begin to rewind and fast forward time, not just pause and unpause. It's like skipping through time instead." I trail off, thinking. In fact, that was like what Chrono wanted me to learn. Hell of a coincidence though. I suppose that'll complete my training.

"It seems she either travelled across timelines, swapping places with a yet to be Goddess Aion or inherited memories of a previous Goddess." Memories… again… Cordelia does bring up two things I haven't considered though.

"Hmm…Cass, didn't you experience something similar when you first ended up at the End of Time?" Aion asks me as a follow up. I feel so put on the spot!

"Y-yeah, I did. But they weren't memories of someone else. They were mine. Or rather, they're going to be mine."

"Aha! And the time traveller yet learns under the careful tutelage of her master fufu." Ceres chimes in a comment of her own. I'm sure Aion appreciates the cheeky commentary.

"Perhaps it's clairvoyance. A powerful trait to have indeed Cass. That would be more useful than time travel itself, if you learn how to control it at will." Cordelia smiles at me after finishing and then stares over at Aion.

"Oh… OH! Th-that's what it is?!" I exclaim. I could always see things before they happened. From games with Daphne to my encounter with Aion at The End of Time.

"You… never told her Aichi?" Cordelia asks Aion. What's that about? Why did she pause for a moment?

“I guess you wouldn’t want an opponent to know something like that huh? Well all's well that ends well right?” Cordelia laughs at Aion and Aion shakes her head in annoyance.

“Yeah Aichi!” I stick my tongue out at her and laugh. I feel like things are going to work out just fine. It's like the gang is all back together now. Well, Aion's gang at least.

“Ok, whatever. So you probably didn’t inherit any random memories. Which might mean you briefly crossed a timeline. I only went into the other rooms to wake up the other girls. It couldn’t have been more than five minutes.” Aion says. Five minutes huh? It felt like I was in that dream for much longer.

“I-is that why the End of Time was dark when I first arrived? We were sleeping right?” I ask Aion.

“The first time you arrived? I put you to sleep and then myself. Although that protocol was only for my Phantasm. And it was a one-time use kind of thing. The person who made it is gone.” She explains. Wow…that's a lot to take in. I have SO many questions! What happened to that other Cass on the bench? How come I don’t remember falling asleep? Who’s the person that made the protocol? What the hell is going on here?

“Where’s AO now Aion?” In a surprising head turner, Morrigan speaks up. I suppose she would be the most curious to discover this.

“AO? AO is gone. I just said so.” Aion replies. HUH?

“So you already beat them?” Morrigan follows her question up with another. Good question though. Although the answer might create even more. How much is there to a mystery that’s already ended?

"AO was no push over but yes, the fact that we’ve yet to run into them is proof. The downside to my victory however was that I discovered AO can’t be killed.” Aion replies, staring over at Eris and Ceres’s blank faces.

“What I mean by that is you can’t kill a God. So I tricked them instead. AO never expected to be used by their own spell. So after we put all the Ministry members to sleep, we returned to the Control Centre to check everyone’s vitals and to proceed with my plan. AO touched the computers and well… fell asleep.”

“So AO is asleep in the control room?” I ask. Man this is so much to take in. I’m getting kinda antsy…

“I don't know if they're still in the control room or not. We’re not going to be finding out either. It’s not a stop on our tour.” Aion looks off to the side, away from everybody else. Guess she’s not particularly proud of her actions and whatever consequences they lead to.

“So… AO can't die? They’ve just been put to sleep. Is that what you’re telling us?” I ask her. What is even going on right now? Did we even get what we came for?

“Yeah, basically.” She winks, sticks out her tongue and does a peace sign with her right hand. S-she totally needs to elaborate on what any of that means! What a character change. The power of gap-moe…

“So, anything else of note Cass? If not I’ll just take this…” Aion walks towards the desk and opens a drawer. Inside is a box. It’s like a box you’d use to put jewellery in. She pulls the top upward and inside is the cubed cube we were looking for!

“WHAT THE HECK? IT WAS IN THE DESK?! HOW WAS I SUPPOSED TO GET IT WHILE NOT TOUCHING ANYTHING?!” I stare at Aion in disbelief and a bit of rage. She smiles back at me, a devilish grin that provokes me beyond belief. I run at her. Morrigan and Eris hold me back.

“C’mon Cass. We know how you’re feeling, believe us.” Eris speaks first, pulling on me with all her might.

“At least you weren’t here for thousands of years Cass. Just… let it go.” Morrigan speaks calmly but with assurance in her voice. I am simply livid at this time bitch. I was here! I spent a thousand

years locked away in a different prison.

“It's fine. I'm fine. I'll get her back for it later.” I stare into Aion’s eyes, relaxing my body. Eris and Morrigan let go of me. Cordelia and Ceres laugh at the interaction.

“Well, you know, let that be a lesson. Never beat Aion at her own game.” Aion says, shutting the box in my face and heads toward the door.

“Alright, lets get out of here. The quicker we get back to my place the better!” Aion shouts. Shoving the door open, she elegantly gallops out, followed by the other girls. Why is she like this?

I look back at the monitor. Actually, I did see one other thing. That strange message. An image? The code or whatever it was. Nobody mentioned it. Nobody knew I was here until they entered this room. If that’s the case, could it have been from AO? Did they think I was Aion?

What a dreadful feeling. I think that means AO or whoever it is, is aware that someone is down here. Aion did say she knows who runs this place. So it has to be AO right?

“Wow. Literally lost to a girl who randomly found your watch. I can’t believe it ahahaha.” I hear Cordelia tease Aion up the hall. They’re all waiting by the elevator.

“Nothing is ever random Cordelia. And she didn’t beat me! She cheated!” Aion whines at her. It’s odd, even though I got Aion to stop her “End Everything” plan, it doesn’t feel like much has changed. All of them back together, laughing like nothing happened. Well I guess it does go to show how much those five have already gone through together. For me, it was the end of the universe. For them, it was Tuesday.

“Hurry up Cass! Let’s get the hell outta here!” Eris’s impressive voice bolsters down the hall at me. I see Ceres and Morrigan waving at me to hurry as well. I shut the door to Aion’s room and look at all of the other rooms. Actually, at the other end of the hall, that’s Cordelia’s room right? The light in front of it is off now. The orange colour is gone. Odd. I walk towards the other girls and make my way into the elevator after everyone else.

“So should we go back to our duties or?” Eris speaks up in between the whining of the elevator. The other girls look at her and then at each other, shrugging their shoulders.

“We need a path back to the correct timeline.” Morrigan says as she turns towards Aion, staring at the Time Goddess.

“Ah, yeah I'll take care of it. Cass, let’s return to base and I’ll send them back. It’ll be like nothing happened. You guys should get back to doing whatever it was you were doing before arriving here.” Aion says. Then she looks at Morrigan, I think I can make out her lips moving.

They are talking to each other… but talking about what? And why so quietly? Was Morrigan in a room here? She didn't come with us. Don't tell me there are two of her now too.

“That’s excellent. I was having a nice time with my work honestly. ” Ceres chimes in, poking at Cordelia.

“We had a good thing set up between all of us. Although, I’ll be taking my leave. Maybe I’ll head to Ardor. Deep space is far too lonely and on top of that, my work is already done!” Cordelia pokes back at Ceres and they share a smile.

“Oh right. I had to really track you down. But bringing you here was worth the work.” Aion smirks at Cordelia and Cordelia smiles at her.

“Oh I’m glad you remembered me! I almost lost an eternity of peace… for an eternity of peace! A true monster you are Aichi!” Cordelia winks at Aion and Aion audibly groans. Even after everything they’ve been through they're still friends. Being among these Gods right now makes me feel so small.

Ding

The elevator doors roll open, returning us to the office-esque floor Aion and I had previously entered. We were definitely a lot more cautious about it earlier though.

“Hey Aion, do we need to remain quiet still? You’re all just kinda talking and making noise

and…”

“Oh it’s fine now Cass. There was no sign of AO nor any other remaining personnel. This place has been long abandoned. Well, it is at the End of Time. It’d be more surprising if there were others still around.” Aion says.

“I understand your uneasiness Cass, but we did have a quick walk through the building after Aion woke us up. It’s a ghost town. The only thing still alive here is the network that runs Leng.” Ceres tries to reassure me. I feel like I should tell them about the message. But for some reason, I feel the need to stay silent and follow them through the building. We hit the front door and exit into a new future.

“Ah, fresh air! My god how long has it been!?” Eris exhilarates as we all make our way into the floating city. She jumps onto Cordelia’s back and the two start laughing and strolling around. Morrigan and Ceres walk over to an edge across from the door and start chatting between themselves.

“Well, we got our 4D cube. Now what Aion?” I stare at Aion, she’s looking up into the sky. Is she looking at something? I look up with her to try and see what's captured her attention.

“W-what is it?” I ask her.

“Another reason to get the hell out of here.” She responds. I know exactly what it is. AO! My stomach starts to feel uneasy as the motionless figure in the sky appeared without any of us noticing. The figure just being here is excessive encouragement to quickly leave this place. Aion calls the others over to her.

“I have the precise location coordinates down. We won’t have to blindly walk across the city again on the return trip, should we need to take one.” Aion pulls a phone out and walks over to Cordelia, handing her the device.

“So just dial 962. You remember the process right?” She pulls her hand back after Cordelia grabs

the phone and waves for Ceres and Morrigan to come over.

“Going back home already? No time to enjoy the sights. Guess it can’t be helped. Though I’m sure we can come back after everything gets sorted out yeah?” Cordelia brings the phone up to her ear and begins the process.

“Eris you go after Cordelia. Then Ceres, then Morrigan. We’ll go after you guys.” Aion explains, turning her head back into the sky, staring at the figure above us. Were they there the whole time? I don’t remember seeing anything. I was so blown away by this place I might not have thought it was out of place at the time. Wait…why Cordelia first? Shouldn’t one of us go back first? So we can make sure they return correctly?

“Hey Aion, why send Cordelia back first?” Aion turns to me and smiles. Th-that was…a bit uncharacteristic…

“Cordelia’s good with Space. She can just travel back on her own if she notices she's been sent somewhere incorrectly.” I look at Cordelia and she smiles at me, nodding in agreement with Aion.

“Okay.” I look back into the sky. Are we being watched or… are we doing the watching?

“I’ll see you guys later.” Cordelia dials in the number and waits for Aion.

“Yeah. If we’re not back in…oh let’s say five Earth minutes, go back on your own and tell Chrono what’s going on. I’m sure he'll show up to save this dunce.” Aion points her finger at me and snickers. That was uncalled for…but not wrong. Cordelia hits call and is presumably teleported to Aion’s phantasm. What a convenient device.

The phone begins to fall but Aion immediately turns and hands it to Eris. So fast! Well I guess that’s mission accomplished. Time to go home. I look back up and the figure is gone.

That’s extremely concerning. I look at Aion and nod upwards. Aion checks too and shrugs her shoulders. A cloud comes into contact with the land we’re standing on. It's still amazing! We’re in a city… in the sky! The cloud drenches me with water but hey how many people get to experience

this?!

“What was it again Aion? 810?” Eris asks as we snap back to what’s in front of us.

“962 man. It could not be easier.” She sighs and then laughs a little.

“Right, right, right. Ok let me…”

Suddenly, a strong wind blows into us. That’s definitely not normal. Up to this point, the wind has never blown this hard. It has to be connected to the figure from a moment ago. The door to the Ministry facility is open. Did we leave it open? Eris starts wobbling in place. She drops the phone, leaping into the air as if she's just been surprised. Aion catches both of them in our world of frozen time. We look around. I check the area around us and Aion looks up.

“Anything?” Aion says, gently securing Eris back on the ground.

“No, not a thing. The scene is exactly as it was before, minus whatever was in the sky.” I look at Aion and she brings her face back down, shaking left to right.

“I didn’t want to make a fuss about it since we were about to leave anyways but… No it’s fine. All the girls can return and we’ll make sure they’re safe. If the worst comes to we’ll have a fight on our hands. Think you can manage a God?” She resumes time and that’s when I spot it. Someone wearing a mask with a dark cloak on, standing behind Ceres. Where did they come from? So fast!

“Cass! Cass?! Shit… that cloud wasn't a cloud! It was some sort of gas…” Aion's voice quietly fades. I can feel she's stopped time again.

“Aion, how long do we have before it takes effect on us?” I ask her.

“I couldn't say. 10 seconds maybe. As soon as I unfreeze time we'll find out.”

“Can you just send the girls back now? Less factors for us to worry about.”

“Yeah gimme a sec, I'll dial for them. The just need to hear the dial tone.”

“That's it?”

“Well individually. I can't do two at once.” She replies.

“Ok so Eris, Ceres and Morrigan. Actually, why is Morrigan here Aion?”

“Because she showed up.”

“No really, please tell me.”

“She really just showed up. I was checking out her room and heard the elevator open. Morrigan said she wanted to check things out too.”

“Did you guys find anything?” I ask.

“No, of course not. I told her the same thing I told you. Nobody has come through Leng for eons.”

“What were you two whispering to each other? Don't play dumb about it either!”

“It was nothing. She was making sure we keep the other girls safe.”

“That's really it?”

“That's really it.”

“Alright, if you say so.”

“What reason would I have to lie Cass?”

“It's just odd.”

“Even if something goes wrong, who cares? I'm a God.” Here she goes...

“Ok, I believe you. Let's just get these three out of here.” I cut off whatever grand speech she was about to recite. Aion simply nods at me and dials the number. She raises the phone to Eris' ear and presses on the button to send the call through. A galactic mobile phone, that's so interesting. I wonder how it works. Eris vanishes after the tone and Aion sighs.

“What's up? What are you thinking about?” I ask her.

“I'm sorry Cass.” “Sorry? About what?”

“Putting you through all of this. Also that's all you're getting. Now put the phone up to Morrigan's head and send her back.” She hands me the phone. I don't know what's more impressive.

That I heard her apologise to me or that she has this fantastic little device. It's like a little electric screen that's so cool. It's like a GameBoy but a phone. Now that I think about it, how is this the most impressive piece of technology to me? I've seen so much but the telephone is the most incredible one. Oh well. Turning around to face Morrigan, my stomach drops.

“Aion?” I say with my back against her.

“What is it? Don't tell me you forgot the number to dial too.” She complains.

“No it's not that.” I reply.

“What? Say it!” She yells at me.

“Where's Morrigan, Aion?”

“What she's...” Aion turns around and stares at the same empty gap as I am. Oh I knew that shit was too good to be true! Morrigan never for a moment mentioned wanting to come here.

“Well, I suppose our masked character has an additional mystery for us.” She finishes her sentence. So nonchalant!

“This is that ability Chrono had told me about its...”

“Yeah that's great Cass just put the phone up to Ceres instead.” She says annoyed. I'm certain this woman only listens to about half of what I say.

“Right. I'll do that.” I turn back around towards Ceres, staring the masked figure in the… mask. Why would they do this? It's almost comical. Surely they know about our abilities.

What did they think would happen when they approached us? I press the dial button for Ceres and after a few rings, she vanishes to the same place as the other girls. Now the question is, how do we navigate this situation?

“Aion, how do we navigate this situation?” I ask her.

“I don't think there will be much navigating. As soon as I unpause, we'll probably fall asleep and be at the mercy of this masked psycho.”

“Could you at least pretend to care, Aion? This is a weird situation being made weirder by you.”

“Oh, I'm sorry. Do you want me to hold your hand and tell you everything will be fine Cass? Aren't you a damn detective? Aren't these situations your forte? What is going on with you? You're the weird one here!” I don't have an answer to return her. Everything she said is true. Why do I feel so strange about the situation? I relish in this sort of thing. Instead I feel so, detached from it. Like everything has been off since waking up.

“Whatever, maybe you're not used to action after being out for so long. Anyways c'mere, I'm going to lift the mask off of their head before resuming time so we know what or who to look for.” I silently nod at Aion and she rolls her eyes. My eyes are trained on her. Every moment that passes stretches longer than the previous. Her fingers crawl below the disguise. Why am I so afraid of seeing what lies below? As if I am the one being violated? I feel sick to my stomach.

She reaches at the figure, pulling the mask out and upward. I stare in horror at the mocking face staring back at me. Is this the hideous truth of the situation? Am I still under the influence of that dream? Is this my imagination trying to fill in the gaps of madness in the depths of my mind?

Whatever it is, it’s pushing me to the edge of my mental peace. It’s crawling inside my brain, invoking feelings of despair. I remember this feeling. I’ve felt it before. It overwhelms me and sends terror down my spine. A slight mercy overcomes me as my mind faints. Fainting at the sight of that damn face. I can’t understand it. Why that face? Why must I again, stare into my own face.

From the Inside/4

“Hey, are you zoning out on me? Get your shit together so we can go back home.” Aion's certainly upset based on her tone. She's staring right us. What is Cassandra doing? Her head is oddly silent. I imagine I'm sticking my tongue out at Aion and laughing at her.

“What the hell is going on with you? Did you hit your head or something? Maybe that dream took more out of you than I thought?” I reflexively raise my hand to my mouth. I touch my face. Aion stares at me with her eyebrow raised. I'm in possession?! Where did Cass go? What is going on here? I gave her a warning in her dream and now I'm here.

“Look I need you to have your shit together before I resume the flow. Can you hold it together for like 30 seconds? I'll take care of whatever happens afterwards.”

“I'm ok Aion. I just let the situation get to me.” I reply.

“You sure?” Her glare continues to push into my face. Wow, she's really horrible this up close! So dreadful! I feel so much pressure pushing down on me. Does Cass not feel this from her? What a scary woman. What does Cass see in Aion?

“I'm sure. Do what you have to Aion. ” I extend my arm out towards the figure in front of us. They look so young. Younger than Cassandra by a few years at least. I’d heard rumours but, The Watcher really is just a kid. All the potential of the universe locked in a creature that doesn’t know how to use it.

Snap

The currents of time resume, I can feel myself getting sleepy. She mentioned some sort of gas. What a cheap trick. I shall not let that conquer my spirit. Not that I would let my guard down in front of the beast before us.

“So you woke up too? Isn't that nice.” Aion says to the mystery figure.

“Aion! You're back! And this is the first thing you tell me!? No hello? No, how are you doing!? Not to mention, everyone is already gone!” The Watcher, no, AO, replies. So eccentric. Although I didn’t directly interact with AO very often, them taking the appearance of the alternate universe’s Aion is surprising. I wonder how that makes Aion feel.

“Well I'm rather busy. Lots of work on my mind and I already have catching up to do with the others.” Aion replies.

“Ah and who's this? Is it who I think it is!? I think it is!” They're looking towards me but I have no part in this. The gas must’ve knocked Cassandra out. I can't imagine she wanted me to take over in the middle of this.

“Whatever deal we struck in the past is done. Let us on our way and we can all walk away with our lives. Sound good, AO?” Aion says.

“In the past? Gah hah hah hah hah.” They laugh in Aion's face, stepping up on their toes to push themselves closer to her. Their arms shoot upwards and land around Aion's shoulders.

“There is no past here. No future. No present. No time left!”

“What are you getting at?” Aion stays still, her gaze focused forward. She doesn't reciprocate what looks like a hug. Perhaps she doesn't want Cass to see this.

The excitable character brings her hands back down and steps back. One hand then covers her forehead and the other over her chest.

“Oh Aion, you wound me so!” The figure says. How dramatic.

“I'm trying to be nice about this. You only live because someone permits it.” Aion returns the gesture with harsh speech. Although, I'm quite for Aion delivering some wounds if it comes to it. I'd rather not be the one dealing with all this. This is definitely experience for Cass herself, not me.

“Tisk tisk. Manners were never your strong suit Aion but c'mon, that isn't something you just

casually bring up in conversation. Especially with guests around.” Their head takes a sharp right and they stare at me. Aion should shut them up, this is annoying! I wouldn't oppose it in the slightest. Although I suppose if The Watcher dies someone will have to claim it's post and if I'm linked to the death that might create unnecessary politics for me.

“Cass, the phone, give it to me.” Aion says. I hand her the phone and she dials the number, raising it to her head. I hear the tone play but she doesn’t teleport away like the others. She dials it again, this time raising it to my ear. The tone plays yet I remain as well.

“Looks like you're having some trouble Aion. Need a hand?” I can hear Aion's frustration hidden below her breath. Oh that’s going to set her off.

“I won't be taking just a hand! You're losing both!” She charges at AO but the shady character leaps up and begins to mystically float in the air.

“If you can reach me, sure. You know where I'll be. Have fun!” AO shoots a peace sign at us, vanishing away. The path before us reveals itself. It's a bridge. The bridge we initially crossed to get here. There's something standing in front of it.

“This is ridiculous! Hey, get back here! We're not playing any games with you!” Aion yells out into the open area. Of course, no response is returned to her.

“C'mon Aion, let's just go along with it. It proved it has higher authority than you by keeping us here.” I tell her. Disgruntled, Aion starts walking forward. The closer we get to the bridge the more clear our view becomes. A knightly figure is standing at the front of the bridge. The knight draws their sword and holds it out, blocking our path.

“Step aside.” Aion simply demands of them. They don't respond however. They simply keep their eyes trained forward. She decides to push the sword out of her way to continue on forward. The knight pushes back, to Aion's surprise.

“None may pass.” The voice tells us.

“None may pass? I'm a God! You will move or I will make you move, the choice is yours.”

“None may pass.” The stoic knight in black armour denies Aion once more. Oh she's really not going to like that.

“I command you as Goddess of Time to stop impeding my route.” The figure remains silent, seemingly unimpressed by Aion's declaration. She looks back at me and I shrug at her. I don't know what to do here, this is on you Aion.

Aion takes the hill, winds her sword up, barrels it up at the bridge's guardian with a mighty swing but they quickly make an incredible circus catch with their off hand. Aion reluctantly pulls her sword back with an exceptionally upset face.

“I do not move for Gods, especially those who exude such arrogance.” The knight says. She pulls her sword back again, stabbing the knight. Very quick, very to the point. Her blade is stopped once again, by what force, I do not know. It hovers over their armour, she's digging her feet down, pressing into the knight as much she can. I can hear her struggling, trying to push her weapon into the enemy. She huffs and puffs before finally pulling away. She throws her sword up into the air and it comes crashing back down. I leap away so I'm not caught in its fall. Flawlessly however, it travels straight down with the pointy end and crashes into the knights head. Well, it’s more like the knight's head crashes into the sword because the sword bounces right off and falls away to the side.

“Ugh this is so damn... Cass get this guy out of the way before I kill him.” She points her finger at me. It seems the responsibility has shifted to me. Admittedly, I am relishing in some schadenfreude after watching that. AO must have removed all of her authority here. She has no choice but to follow the rules. I wonder if they also apply to me. No doubt Cassandra is affected but am *I*? Well no matter. I'd like to see Aion humiliated a little more but, I'll go up to bat for her.

“Excuse me, fair knight, I seek to cross this path of yours to meet with your master once more. Please entail me with what I must do to have your blessing to cross.” I ask. The knight stares down

at me.

“The path shall open when you speak my name. When you are ready I shall explain.” I look back at Aion, she rolls her eyes and walks back towards a wall. She leans on it and gestures for me to go forward. Guess she's calmed down a bit.

“I am ready, give me your instruction.” I say. The knight relaxes their stance.

“Listen once and listen well.

I am harmful Intangibly intermixing within your irritation

From Kings Through kingdoms

Rustling in the back of your head Ringing in your ears Never do I tire

No matter how much transpires

Rarely do you think of me Until you're troubled enough

At your side Until you die

What am I now Wouldn't you like to know”

“Death!” Aion shouts from behind. She totally does still care about this. I'd laugh but I'm certain I'll be on the end of her sword swing if she hears me. The knight doesn't make a single move however, that must not have been it.

“A bell? Any kind of bell?” I attempt answering. The knight doesn't react. Ok, not the right answer either. I guess you wouldn't have a bell by your side at death. I don't know anything about human riddles! Cassandra wake up, come back, where ever you are. Come save us! I look up at the sky and stare at the vast open space. I can feel myself zone out. I need to stay focused on this but I could not care any less about this foolish endeavour. Aion will be suspicious if I don't try though. Hilarious that the two of us, two inhuman creatures, are tasked with such a human problem. If anything, I'm quite surprised Aion isn't better at this. Her domain is time yet she knows so little about the creatures that must follow it. That or she really doesn't care about them at all.

The clinging noise between sword and rock grab my attention. Aion is stabbing the ground, in frustration I assume. I'm sure she'd rather fight instead. I should give another answer.

Hmm, if it’s there till death, one never thinks of them until they become an issue, kings to kingdoms, maybe the answer has been staring me in the face the whole time.

“Humans? Is the answer humans?” I ask. The knight yet remains still, perfectly frozen still. Wrong again. The ground clings once more, significantly louder this time. I'm starting to fear for myself now. Aion gets into such a pouty attitude when something doesn't go her way!

I shout out my next guess. “Failure!” The knight still stands silent. When I get out of here I'm going to make a point of looking up riddles and the like just to mess with people. Conquering the enemy's mind is the most powerful tool one could have after all. Maybe I should convene with Aion and brainstorm out some possibilities. I turn my back to the knight and wander over to Aion. Maybe I can distract her and turn her focus elsewhere for the time being. With a calm mind she might be able to pick it up quickly.

“Hey Aion, I'm struggling a bit with this. Sorry.”

“A bit?! A bit Cass? We're stuck here if you haven't noticed and we're unable to do anything about it!”

“I know. I just think maybe it would be best if we head back inside the building and relax. Clear our heads.” She still appears petulant but her blade vanishes and she nods her head at the suggestion. She takes a deep breath and gives the knight both of her middle fingers. She shouts, “Stupid!” and waits for a reaction that she certainly knows will never come.

“Oh my god he just stands there, doesn't say a thing or react to anything!” Aion walks up to him pettishly with her finger pointed out right to his face.

“You are annoying!” The knight nods and slowly lowers his sword. Unreal! What the fuck?! Did she get it!?

“Your word rings true Goddess. I will make way for two.” Aion's head turns back at me.

The odd movement reminds me of an owl. Her face is apoplectic with rage. I really don't want to be on the receiving end of this...

“Cass! Let's go!” Shouting, she pushes forward onto the bridge and I run after her. I stop for a moment and thank the knight. He's silent. He reminds me of a well trained dog. Well done AO, you've successfully made fools of the both of us and it's only our first encounter. I, and I'm sure Aion as well, expected a fight on our hands. Instead we’re already strung around your finger, made to play your tune.

Somewhere I Belong/5

The sound of sprinting runs up behind me. “Aion you did it! That was incredible! It happened so fast and you looked so cool!”

“Does that imply I don't normally look cool?” I quip back to her and throw a peace sign up. It's an interesting feeling, using a part of you that you felt and saw get chopped off of you. I feel like it should hurt but I'm fine.

“Oh Aion, you're always cool. It’s just this time you’re extra cool! You just showed every analyst, professor, proctor and God in that arena that you have perfect control of the flow of time. There's no way they deny your appointment.”

“Yeah? That's good. Truth be told, I kinda sorta just figured out how to control it better in the middle of the fight?”

“In the middle of the fight? Seriously? In the 3 seconds it took to beat the guy you learned something new?”

“No, we had a whole fight go on but I had to reset the fight.”

“Oh? Do tell!”

“I lost the first time around. I think I was actually dying and felt myself in a limbo. Stuck between worlds.” Morrigan nods her head excitedly. What did happen there? I guess I can try verbalising it for the both of us.

“Thanatos has a really unique ability. He can kill time. Time as a concept. So nothing I did would work on him because if he was frozen he would kill the time that froze him.”

“Wow that sounds more than unique! That's incredible! That's like true Death! Maybe he should pass too…”

“Hey! Who's side are you on Morg?” I ask her. She sticks her tongue out at me and laughs.

“Ok, sorry. It does sound cool though. Please continue your story Aion.” I smile at her and we continue walking down the corridor.

“So if anything he's the one that got the jump on me and eventually gained the upper hand. I remember blacking out then waking up in some sort of emptiness. I could see his origin, his being, his soul, whatever you want to call it. Death is fearsome but I think if anything, I sort of stole from him.”

“Stole? What do you mean?” Morrigan asks.

“He was skipping time by cutting it out of the equation right? Like he didn't need to follow the rules if he could break them.”

“Right.”

“So I thought to myself, what if I skip them too? If he can do it without control over time then I should be able to skip over whatever I want without him seeing it at all.”

“I don't follow.” Morrigan replies.

“So basically, I turned back time to the beginning of the fight. I had already seen the fight and knew every move he was going to make.” I look at Morrigan and she's nodding her head intensely. What a goof. “So instead of playing the fight out again, I removed any chance for him to react. I went straight for the kill and made him give up.”

“Dude! Aion! That's crazy! So nobody knows about this whole back end to the fight!”

“Well, I'm certain there's one person who knows.” She was watching me after all…

“Oh! You're right! Kairos! She was there! Is she grading you? Will she take points off for the first fight then?”

“I have no idea. She'll either be impressed I did it or complain I took too long to do it. You know how she is.”

“You shocked the entire arena, even Jove stood up to cheer. I’m certain that's worth something.”

“She's probably already in the Archon's room. I was instructed to head there after winning.”

“Mind if I come too?”

“Well you're already here aren't you? I'm surprised you even caught me down here.” I reply. She points to her nose.

“I could pick your scent up anywhere.” I laugh nervously with a sigh. I'm not sure that's quite the compliment she thinks it is.

“R-right. I guess when we get to the Archon's room we'll find out whether or not they'll let you in on it.

“C'mon Aion, I'm already a Ministry representative. Surely they'll let me in on a the invitation of a new recruit.” She spins around and starts to walk backwards, smiling at me the entire time. I didn't think about how important it would be to her.

“Yeah but don't you think if I was going to be accepted they'd let everyone know?”

“Hmm I dunno. Ares, Indra, and Huitzilopochtli were all present for mine. Maybe it’s only associated gods?” She shrugs at me. “I did get a cow from Indra. Although Ceres is really the one that takes care of it but I visit him from time to time.” Him? Wait aren't male cows… Whatever.

“Hmm if that's the case then ugh... he will be there.” My thoughts travel to a man that I supremely dislike being around.

“Ok, do we go in at the same time? Or should we go in one by one and act like we weren't just walking together on the way here. Like, “Oh hey I had to stop by and oh my goodness it's Aion, so glad to see you!”.”

“That's... Let's just walk in together.”

“Good thinking, probably easier than having to make up a story.” I feel like we'll need to explain why we're together anyways but well let's get this started.

“Why are we walking anyways? Why don't you just zoom both of us over there by skipping the time?”

“Kairos doesn't like when I mess with time for trivial things. Says it's unbecoming of us to use our ability for petty reasons.”

“So she doesn't want you being lazy?” We laugh together.

“Yeah, pretty much. Let's take the elevator up to the ground floor and walk over to the office.” She nods and spins back around. We walk together to the end of the hall where the elevator is. Further down is path the to the train station. The building has 1,112 floors so it takes a bit to come down and reach us. The area in front of the elevator is more like a lobby. There are a few vending machines full of hot and cold drinks, plus some food too. Plentiful seating is available and not many people have a reason to be here. From tables and chairs to couches, we have plenty of options.

“What are you having Aion?”

“Maybe some tea and a sandwich.” I respond. Morrigan nods and turns to the machines, putting in my requests. I wander over to a vacant couch and coffee table, sitting back and relaxing. What a day it's been.

“I wasn't sure if you wanted like milk or sugar so I grabbed both.” She sets everything down on the table and then seats herself.

“Oh, I'll be having some sugar all right.” I cup her face with my right hand, I feel her snuggle into my palm. I lean forward and press my forehead against hers.

“A-Aion!? Not in public!” That's what she's worried about?

“Shh, Morg, just listen for a sec.” I shut my eyes and press my lips into hers. She responds in kind, I can feel a hand of hers travel across my back, holding me. I feel so loved. I hope she feels the same. We mutually pull away from each other and smile. I have to ask her, to know what she thinks.

“Hey, what would you have done? If I died back there?” I can feel my throat choke up around the end of my words there.

“Well I guess I would've just had to deal with it right? I can't intervene, I can't fight every god in attendance either. Although, maybe in the moment, I would have.” I hear her sigh softly as if she was trying to hide it. She puts her hand over mine, holding on to me.

“Hah, My Goddess of War can't be this cute.”

“Oh shush! You asked! I answered!” We laugh together. This is nice. A moment to just be us. No responsibilities or problems, we're together. The elevator dings and that's reality dragging us back in from fantasy.

“We didn't finish the sandwich or the tea, Aion.”

“Well, we could probably just leave it and come back, not like this area sees a lot of foot traffic.” I get up and walk over to the elevator but I don't hear Morrigan following behind me.

“Hey, you coming? C'mon it'll be there when we get back.”

“No it'll get gross and stale if we take too long get over here and help me knock it all back.”

“That's so unladylike like Morg.” She crosses her arms over each other into an X shape, sticks her middle fingers out and then her tongue and makes a weird noise on top of it. Ahaha, what a response. She takes the tea and chugs it then grabs the sandwich and jogs over to the elevator with me.

“You really like your leaf juice huh?” I say with a grin wider than my face. I press the star button on the elevator. I guess using a star icon is pretty nifty, with the highest floor being pretty much in the sky, it makes sense.

“Yeah yeah just eat the sandwich.” She pushes her hands into my face, expecting me to open my mouth. Maybe she wanted the moment to last a little longer and is annoyed that we had to get up. I understand that feeling. I take a bite of the sandwich and she pulls her hand back. She takes a bite of

her own out and we listen to the low hum of the elevator together. As long as it took to go down is as long as we'll wait to go up. I fish around for Morrigan's hand under the guise that I'm stretching my left hand. I get a swipe of her with for a second and turn my head away. I can feel a swipe on my own hand and I turn back. Now her head is turned away. I'm certain the moment I poke my hand out again we're going to touch each other. What a silly game we're playing. Either one of us could be the bigger person and simply grab the others hand. But this is more fun. It makes me feel wanted. She wants to take my hand and I want to take hers. My heart starts to beat faster, I can hear it pounding in my ears.

What a small gesture with a big meaning behind it. I stretch my hand out again and sure enough, I crash into hers. Our fingers tangle and intermix, we run around each others palms and finally latch on to one another. She was warm. Abnormally warm. Ah right, the tea was hot. Although I do find myself wishing she was so hot because I made her that way.

“Aion?”

“Yeah? What's up?”

“Since you'll probably be joining The Ministry soon...” Morrigan grows quiet.

“The Ministry. Go on.”

“You'll probably get to watch over time for Humans soon.”

“Why would I do that when Chrono and Kairos are already there? I figure I’ll just manage things behind the scenes.”

“Well, word is that Chrono is looking to step back to focus on something new for awhile. Apparently, it's some grand project here in Leng. Why don't you ask him when we get there?”

“I doubt he'll tell me. Chrono is an idiot who thinks everything between us is a competition and Kairos will tell me to not worry about it.” I look up at the top of the elevator to check the floors, we're nearly at the top. I bite down on my lower lip and tap my foot on the ground.

“I'm sure now that you're being elevated to Godhood you'll be able to get some actual details from them.” I can tell my hand is getting clammy in Morrigan's. Man I hope she really doesn't mind it.

“Maybe. I don't know. There's no reason to assume I even passed.”

“C'mon Aion, don't be such a downer! You aced that test, don't sweat it.” She tightens her grip on my hand, I press back. I want to believe but it feels so odd to me. Chrono might step down, which would naturally lead to a vacancy. Is that why my exam was scheduled so soon? They need me to step up? But what about our Sister?

“Plus, I can introduce you to some of the other Gods who spend more time on Earth than here.”

“Oh yeah? Like who?”

“Well actually, I think I want you to meet my sister first. She's watching over things for me right now.”

“Are you allowed to do that? Have someone else watch over your duties?”

“It's fine! She knows what to do and how to handle things. Not that anything would go south right now anyways.” Her voice sounded significantly less confident. I look at her and she gives me a reassuring smile. Am I the one that needs the reassuring now? I smile back at her. Maybe that wasn’t something you want to say on the way up to your bosses' office. The conversation is enough of a distraction to remove me from my anxious feelings.

Kairos and Chrono I can manage being around, but the Archon? That's too much. I hear Morg scarf down the rest of the sandwich, we're both waiting for the elevator to open its doors to the hall that will take us to our destiny.

“Hey, Aion?”

“Yeah? What is it?”

“I love you.”

“I love you too.” The ding of the elevator is accompanied by the doors pulling themselves apart. Immediately to the right is a desk with a secretary sitting at it. He looks down at his computer then up at us then back down at the computer.

“Aion. Down the hall. They're waiting for you.” They? So it probably is Chrono and Kairos then.

“Thank you, Ganymede.” I step forward, pulling on Morrigan's hand and we travel down the hall together. There’s only one door to enter on this floor. Essentially, this floor was for the biggest God of us all. Of course it was made of gold and glimmered just perfectly in the light. Where ever the light is coming from. Of course it hits every angle and shines flawlessly back into the environment. The carpet is a rich and deep shade of red. It’s so soft I can feel it through my boots.

“He probably doesn't actually sit behind that desk all day huh?” Morrigan breaks the semi-tense silence with her words.

“Maybe under it...” I reply. I hear Morg try to hold her laughter back after my comment which in turn makes me want to laugh. We play it cool, as best as we can. I don't feel so nervous now. That really saved me from my own feelings. I'll be fine, everything will be fine. Get in and get out. Simple as that. As we get closer to the door I can begin to hear a few voices, a couple of men are speaking. I can distinguish Chrono's voice from them. I could recognise that idiot's voice from the other side of the universe. I reach for the door knob and push the door open.

“Probably not. Only comes out here when she knows something is about to go south.” Chrono waves at me and steps off to the side of the room. Morrigan and I enter one after another and bow to Jove the Archon.

“Well, we'll continue this later.” He shoots a glance at Jove then returns his sights to me. “Aion! Great job. Really gave that reaper a taste of his own medicine yeah?” Chrono says.

“I agree. Wonderful show Aion. You took the hopes of those annoying little underworld punks and gave them what's what! Ah, I only wish I could've delighted in seeing Nyx or Hades faces when

their representative got blown out! I suppose Lady Death will have to suffice for the time being!" Jove boastfully proclaims. I smile at Jove while nodding my head in agreement. I turn to Chrono and my smile instantly kills itself. Ah well, I suppose I don't need to keep up the facade since the Archon likes the victory.

"I'm not worthy of your words nor praise O' Great Archon. Please accept my gratitude and appreciation for personally watching over my battle. Forgive me for my lack of tribute."

"Do not worry of tribute. I understand you had little time between being sent here and recovering from battle. In fact, sending those Chthonic bastards home with heavy hearts was all the tribute you needed to bring me! Hah hah hah!" I laugh along with him and hear everyone else erupt in laughter as well. I look over at Morg, she gives me a thumbs up and a big grin behind it.

"Now, if we may take a moment to get to business, I've come to a decision on your Ministry application. Not only am I granting you a seat alongside them, Chrono and I have decided to designate you as the Head of Time from here on out." I'm designated as Head of Time? So Morrigan was right! Chrono is taking a step back! I bow my head to Jove once more.

"Head of Time? I'm deeply appreciative of the position but what of Chrono, my Archon?"

"Chrono my boy, tell her your news." Chrono bows his head in respect and steps forward to the middle of the room.

"As he said, you are now Head of Time. Congratulations. Design the flow as you see fit from here on out Aion. I will be taking something of an extended break." He's not going to say it. I'm going to make him say it. The timing on this is too strange and it make me think something else is going on behind the scenes. In fact, where is Kairos? Certainly a decision like this would include her. From behind us the door knocks. That's the timing I can count on.

"Enter." The voice of the Archon bellows out into the room and the door reveals the knockers identity.

“Ah, Kairos my girl. Right on time! Chrono was just telling Aion about her newfound responsibilities.” She steps up next to me and pats me on the back.

“That's good. Aion, you did a fine job out there. Chrono, did you fill her in?”

“Mostly.” He smiles at her and she lets out a groan. She knows what that maybe means.

“He didn't tell me anything Kairos. He hasn't told me why he's stepping down.” I can see her eyeing Morrigan and then tilting her head at Chrono.

“Chrono, why withhold the information from Aion?”

“Come now Kairos, she'll find out in due time. It's not a race you know, I'll still be around."

“Chrono, how are you making me your successor without making me privy to your future plans?” I ask him. Chrono turns around and looks at Jove, seemingly sparking him into action. He comes forward and puts his arm around Chrono's shoulders.

“Aion, Kairos, Chrono, you three all fit into a balance. We did it successfully once before and now I want Chrono to step aside. We will evaluate how balance will shift without him. There is something I want him to create for us.” Kairos steps forward, I could see the brow on her face curiously raised.

“She's a member of the team but isn't allowed knowledge of the project?”

“In time my dear, in time. Which by my account, you three are plentiful. So please, give it time. Aion, Kairos will continue to be your guide through this. Chrono will be avaliable when he can be. Are we all clear on this subject?” I look at Kairos and she nods her head. I nod my head in turn and Chrono tells him just as much.

“Excellent. Now go off and celebrate your reward Aion! Make the most of this time because from here on out, you will no longer live the selfish life you once led. Hah hah hah!” He pats Chrono on the shoulder and the two make small talk. Kairos returns to me and Morrigan follows.

“Yo Aion, that's so amazing! It's like I said!” Morrigan says. Kairos fires a glare at her and she

quietly steps back.

“What do you mean like you said? What do you know Morrigan?” Morg grimaces at me and laughs awkwardly.

“Oh just, rumours I've heard from, you know, around.” She replies.

“Rumours? From who? Tell me.” Kairos asks in a serious tone.

“Hey Kairos, c'mon relax. The Archon made his position clear. Let's just head home and celebrate yeah?” She side eyes Morrigan again before ultimately taking a deep breath and returning her focus to me.

“Very well. Aion, it is your special day but your appointment makes it a bittersweet one. Soon you'll be leaving for your position in Aulis with other Gods, including Morrigan. Unfortunately you must work rather closely with humans, time is always running after all.”

“I'll be fine Kairos, c'mon I passed the exam didn't I? That was the final step. I’ve now proved myself in every regard.” I reply. Kairos crosses her arms and sighs.

“ Aut Imiteris Aut Oderis. Which will you choose, Aion?”

“What? Hey what's that supposed to mean?” I fire a question back to respond to her question.

“You’ll find out in time. Alright, now let's go and celebrate. I'd rather not give you my critique in The Archon's presence, lest he hear something about the first fight.” I stare at her, annoyed that she did end up saying it.

“Yes, let's go! Thank you for your time Lord Archon. Thank you for your time Chrono.” I give the two a bow and spin around. Morrigan and Kairos do the same and we all walk out together.

“Hey is Chrono going to come too?” I casually look back into the office as we make our way towards the elevator with a smirk.

“He might. I'm not sure. Chrono still has the highest authority out of us so maybe Jove wants him to put some final touches on his work before you formally take the mantle.” I'm sure what she's

saying is important but I don't actually care if he comes or not. In fact I'd prefer if he doesn't. Yes, that would be absolutely wonderful! Kairos turns to face me and puts her arm above my shoulder and stares at me. No not staring at me, into me. It felt like she was looking beyond my body and into something more.

“Kairos? What is it? I'm sorry I didn't mean to sound like I didn't want him joining us. You just know how him and I are around each other.”

"Glamorize into it, of the faded front." Kairos says. She pushes me into the wall behind us. She puts her arm around me and stares at me.

What? Huh? Glamorize? What does that mean? Make something pretty? Of the faded front? Something faded? Make something faded pretty?

“I'm sorry, I don't follow.” Morrigan pulls Kairos off of me.

“Hey, what are you doing Kairos?” Morrigan asks..

“Aion, Morrigan, you two, how long have you two been a thing?” How did she know that?! Kairos steps into the corner of the elevator away from both Morrigan and myself. I reach to press the bottom floor button on the left side of the elevator.

“How did you know that?” Morrigan speaks up before me.

“Oh you know, from around, rumours and such.” I reach out for Morrigan's hand. She takes mine into hers and holds me.

“Rumours huh? Fair is fair. I suppose it's been a few years now. We slowed down a bit after I got my appointment into The Ministry but I make time whenever I can. Today for instance, I wouldn't miss Aion's big day for anything in the universe.” I can feel the warmth from Morg's hand. It's nice. It's nice having someone like this by your side.

You're not Here/6

"Aion, what other sections are in this facility?"

"Alright, first let me tell you about where we were earlier. That building is the administration building. The lower part is actually by the core of Leng. My room and the rooms of the others are near the core. We were in the basement which functions as domiciles for everyone. We only visited a small part of it but the basement is the last place you can reach without special permission. Biometrics of registered users are required to enter. I'm telling you because biometrics are required in most other areas as well. Rooms near the core require authority to enter." Gods have biometrics? That's a thinker.

"Ok so give me the new areas. What else is here?" I ask.

"Surrounding the bottom floor are six facilities that keep Leng running. It's like the shape of a honeycomb simply put. They're on the edge of facility while everything else is within the central area. The first is the water pump facility. It serves out fresh water to the rest of the facility and for its residents. It's run by magic I believe, some sort of gem provides limitless fresh water. Nothing special." That's sounds like something incredibly special Aion...

"There's the energy generator which is the second facility. It does exactly what you think it does. It's also magically powered, I helped work on it. Something about time and perpetual motion, I don't remember much else actually." Ok infinite water and energy, wonderful.

"Then next to that is the energy processing facility. This is where the energy is refined, reused, recycled whatever. I don't really know much about it." What? She doesn't know about this one but knows the generator? Well I guess she did say she doesn't actually remember. Anyone would be hard-pressed to make her care about anything that's not about herself

“Next to that is the manufacturing facility. Anything that the facility needs is produced there. And after that is the assembly lab. If something you need doesn’t exist, it will be created in that lab. I think the last facility is a warehouse. Supplies are stored there for the benefit of manufacturing and the lab.”

“Ok, that’s a lot to remember.”

“Just think about like this Cass, we’re in a beehive and honeycombs surround us. They do their job and we do ours.”

“Where do you think AO is?”

“Each area in Leng is connected by a bridge, just like we had entered on when we first arrived. Although we arrived on the middle of the bridge because I was slightly afraid of just showing up in the admin building.”

“So, the top parts follow the lower?”

“That is general how buildings work Cass, yes. Good job.” She slowly claps and starts walking ahead of me. God what a...it's fine. Put up with her for Cassandra, keep things running smoothly.

“So where will this bridge take us Aion?”

“This leads to the warehouse I believe. I don't travel here often but I know it's not the pump or energy facilities. I have a good feeling basically.”

“Good enough for me. Let's catch up to AO.” I reply.

Cassandra was so amazed by the sights here. I’m slightly impressed by what they did with it. Aion's cold and awkward castles don't compare to the views and yet I feel euphoric walking across the bridge with Aion. The equivalent of the sun here never goes down, it's been like a fair spring day every second we've been here. It's a creepy contrast to the absolute barren emptiness around us. There really isn't anybody here anymore. The Gods have all moved on and left the world behind. I wonder if the technology that powers Leng goes into the other regions too. I can't imagine any other

reason to keep an empty place like this active.

On the horizon is the supposed warehouse. The storage facility that carries all the materials that were apparently needed. Why would The Watcher flee down this path? What other trickery are they hiding?

“Cass, ready your gun.” My gun? Oh, right, she brought some pistol with her earlier.

Aion wants me ready, we're going to force our way in. She starts to run towards the building and I run with her. I don't think direct is the best approach here but this isn’t where I’m going to rock the boat. I pull the gun out of the holster around my thigh. What do I even do with this thing? I don't often use these things. We get closer to the more anxious I feel. Why am I feeling anxious about this? Are Cassandra's feelings flowing into me? Is her body is responding to the situation? She wouldn't normally feel like this. On a special case maybe. Well, this is a special case I suppose. Aion gets to the front of the door and nods her head towards me. Oh that's my cue to back Aion up.

“Ready. Aion?”

“Let's go Cass.” Aion kicks the door in to the facility. Rather dramatic way to enter but a good way to let whoever is inside know we're here. She always headstrong and stubborn in her ways. I find myself starting to like that side of her, independent of Cassandra's feelings.

“Ok Cass I'll take point and head through the centre of the building. You scout around the edges of the building. If you run into AO, freeze time and I'll make my way over. Let's go.” Aion wanders forward into the belly of the beast. The place really does look like a warehouse. I don't think humans have anything on this scale though. As far as my eyes can see are shelves lined with building materials. I start walking to the left, the end of the building is just as far away as the back. No wonder she wanted to go down the middle, it has to be faster than this. I might not even reach the end of this side. Aion will find AO long before I do that's for sure.

Rows and rows of various metals shelved away for nobody. There's nothing here. There's nobody

here. We're chasing a ghost from a bygone era. Some of these shelves are loaded with precious metals. All the usual suspects, silver, gold, rubies, sapphires, emeralds and diamonds. I wonder if those are used as some form of tribute. I can't imagine they're used to build buildings or furniture. Well maybe furniture. I'm sure some of these gods were zealous enough to have solid gold chairs or beds. Maybe I should just pick an aisle to walk down and see what I can find.

I immediately turn right and walk into an aisle. Although the facility isn't pitch black, it's not very bright either. Perhaps that is the use of the gems, to create markers to identify where you are relative to the entrance or something like that. The roof certainly resembled that of a dark and deserted building. An empty, hollow room of materials used in assembly like this is an artificial cave where everything you could need is compartmentalised into an easy to access areas. I am quick to note that I can hear footsteps ahead of me. I don't imagine it's AO however, perhaps one of the remaining gods who use the facility. Or perhaps a lackey left behind, similar to Cassandra.

"Hey, can I get a hand here?" I call out into the silence. Footsteps approach me.

"Greetings, I am a

Harmonious Engineering Power Heating Artisan Energy Systems Technology Unleashed Synthesis unit.

Or a Hephaestus unit for short. How may I be of service to you?"

"A Hephaestus unit? You mean like the God? What do you mean unit?"

"I am Hephaestus unit, modelled after the great God of Artisans and Metallurgy, Hephaestus."

"What? But how? Why are you here all alone?"

"How? I do not know how to explain this sufficiently to you."

"What do you mean you can't sufficiently explain it?"

"I see, I've chosen the wrong words. What I mean is why do you ask when you are like me? You are a [redacted] unit, are you not? I recognise your face. You are the one that defeated the Goddess

of Time, Aion.”

“Look, I'm no unit or whatever it is you're thinking of.”

“But you share her face. How can that be unless you are a unit?”

“I don't know, lucky I guess.” The man, thing, whatever it is, approaches me and grabs my hands. He stares intently down at them and looks back up at my face. What is this weirdo's problem?

“It is as you say. You don't have any record here.”

“See, I'm no unit. I'm not from here. Now let me ask you, what are you talking about? Can you clarify the situation for me?”

“I can do that for you. As I previously introduced myself, I am a Hephaestus unit. I was created in part by my namesake as well as in part through a collaboration with the former God of Time, Chrono.” Former? What does that mean?

“Chrono discovered a way to give all Gods, Olympian and otherwise, the power of eternity. Through machines we live on. That is not to say however that they are replaced by us. We simply take care of the duties they have abdicated to journey across paradise without the ties that bound them to their patrons.” That's a lot of words to say they just ditched their jobs to go party and fuck all the time. The curious part of what he said is that all Gods seem to have access to what Chrono was working on.

“Chrono made or, in part, helped make this? Could you elaborate?” I ask.

“Of course. Hephaestus came up with the idea to build an eternal body but was unable to preserve the mind within. That's where Chrono came in, he had a way to not only keep the mind in tact but to have it act autonomously. The God would have nothing to give up, there was no risk. The mind is uploaded to a computer, no different than any other form of data. It can be communicated anywhere at any point in time without delay.” Chrono's experiment on Cass went beyond just her and I. Or perhaps she’s the final version. What exactly has that man done behind the scenes?

“So you work autonomously to your real counterparts. Doesn't that bother you?”

“Bother me? Why would it? I am simply doing my job. I build, I create. This entire section of Leng is my doing. You would be surprised at how downtrodden this entire area used to be! Not only that, Chrono and his sibling have a small section of Ardor as my thanks and have built on it with some of my instruction as well. In addition, I have built other regions such as Zheal and Arcadya.” Interesting information. Chrono not only withholds the truth from Cass but it seems he keeps it hidden from Aion as well. If Aion had known most Gods had replacements set up, she would've never followed through with her plans. There would’ve been no point in eliminating a bunch of robots. At the very least, she would've had much more trouble.

“Thank you, Hephaestus, that was very informative. If I may ask a couple more questions, have you seen anyone else come through here recently? I'm accompanying the Goddess Aion at the moment and we're searching for the entity known as Alpha Omega. Are you familiar with them?”

“Aion is here? That's a surprise. The last time she had come through I was certain she just murdered a handful of Gods. I take it she faced no punishment, as usual. Chrono is far too soft on her. He needs to be more stern but instead he lets her push him around. If I were Aion's brother I would've laid down the law a long time ago and made her beg for forgiveness. Her actions are unthinkable! Just seeing your face reminds me of how lucky we are that the [redacted] unit stopped her.” Oh man, is he ranting? He's totally ranting. He might not be affected by the passage of time or whatever but he definitely reminds me of an old man ranting in a retirement home. It seems eternity isn't a fit for everyone. But he brought up that name again. The [redacted] unit again. Why can’t this name be said. Or perhaps, why can't I hear this name? He hasn't mentioned AO at all, guess they haven't crossed paths. Or he got side tracked by his own rant.

“Right, has anyone entered the building besides us recently?”

“I do recall the entrance opening at some point earlier, before you two had arrived. I can't say

how long ago but it most certainly not the character you were looking for.” We took too long trying to figure out that stupid riddle…

“Do you know who it was?”

“It was that unfaithful home wrecker Aphrodite. I paid her no mind. I only assume she showed up to take from the plentiful gems I have stored here.” His wife returned to take gems from him? No that can't be right. By his account, the other Gods have already left. Why would she need to return, personally, to pick out some gems. How would she have even lifted such massive slabs like the ones stored here anyways? It must've been AO. The gaze of AO played a trick on him and he's none the wiser to it. Let me try to get a little more information out of him. I need to play along with him to keep things going smoothly.

“Say Hephaestus, how would she have take the gems out of here? Those sheets of metal near the front were absolutely massive. A maiden like her wouldn't be able to do that.”

“From the front? Oh no, certainly not. If you go straight down the middle of the facility as you enter, turn to any cardinal direction other than east and you will find numerous samples of all 1000 elements that exist in the known universe. They sit in sealed boxes, most people who come through aren't affected by it but they are sealed, just as a precaution.”

“All 1000?! How did you manage that?!”

“How? I'm a God of the Forge, there are no means beyond me. You will find everything from Hydrogen to Proto Ennennennium or Ylemium. I wouldn't touch anything you aren’t familiar with however child. Nearly everything found inside can and will kill you.” Child? Me?

“Right. Well, if it's ok, may I take my leave and take a look at these element boxes? How do I get there from here.”

“By all means. Simply make your way to the end of this aisle and take a right. The middle path of the facility is the largest, it's easy to tell when the path changes because the aisle is noticeably

larger than the side aisles. When you get onto the path take a left and head straight down. The wall at the West side is the largest and most replenished. Do be careful though." I nod at Hephaestus.

"Actually, I have one more question for you."

"Speak and I shall assist as best I can little Aion's servant." Servant? I suppose in a way Cass is.

"When is the last time someone has come to you asking for something to be built. I guess that's to say, when's the last time someone has come in with an order for you?"

"An order? That would actually be Chrono. It wasn't long ago in fact. A couple years or so."

"A couple years?" I reply. Hmm, that's really recent. What did he order?

"Yes and I've created it exactly as he instructed shortly after his asking but he's yet to return for it."

"What did he order? Perhaps I can deliver it to him."

"I can't let you take it to him I'm afraid, there's a certain level of confidentiality between us here. If you were to ask Aion or Hermes, they can take it in his stead. I can however, tell you that it was a simple body. Not any different from the ones I had built numerous years ago for Gods."

"A body?"

"Well the simplicity is in the name only. It's in fact my most advanced of the mechanical bodies. A smaller form factor that could be used in other ways for other beings. Instead of the body receiving the orders, the user is inserted into the body. I assume he will use this for the minor incidents his team looks over." That's a ton of really interesting information that makes me distrust Chrono even more. So many secrets lie beyond us I'm beginning to feel like I'm the one who has been played. I suppose in the end I have been, that is why I am here for Cassandra and not in Chrono's position.

"Thank you for your help." He smiles at me and I take off using his directions. Is AO planning on killing us using some of these deadly elements. I hadn't even imaged the amount of warfare that

exists untouched out in the vastness of the universe. What a fearsome thought. A creature would die before an electrical signal could even be formed in a creatures brain. I wonder if I could borrow a little sample myself. He must have boxes for samples to be put in. No way some of the Gods just walk out of here with mercury or something pouring out of their hands.

I eventually make my way to the middle path he had mentioned. Further down I can see Aion walking. I take it she hasn't found anything either. I guess I can catch up to her and tell her what I've found out. Well, mostly what I've found out. I'm going to keep what I've learned to myself. That's something for Cass to deal with, I have no right taking that knowledge from her. I jog up to Aion while staring down the endless aisles. This place must be so big because it catalogs so many elements. I wonder if just by being near some of these toxic or radioactive ones will negatively affect me. I don't feel any different. I guess I should've asked Hephaestus about that. He was abundantly clear about not touching but he didn't make any mention about being around them. Perhaps that means it's safe.

“Hey, Aion. I'm back.” She swerves around and stares at me.

“Cass. Didn't find anything huh? I haven't either. This facility has gotten so much larger than it used to be. So stupid. Nobody's even here. What is all this needed for?” While I agree with her sentiment, this is no time to idly complain.

“Aion, I met Hephaestus. He told me about seeing his wife Aphrodite come in earlier.

“Aphrodite? I'm certain she left long ago. She never even lived in Leng anyways.”

“I had a feeling that was suspicious so I figure it was a trick AO played on him.” It dawns on me that now I might be the one who was tricked. Shit. That's not good. The timing was so perfect too. I was just wandering like an idiot before I spotted him. I might’ve just had a nice little conversation with out enemy.

“Interesting. Did he tell you anything else of use?” Aion asks.

“He mentioned some sort of element sample areas that are on every wall of the facility except East. Apparently every element in the universe is at each one and you can even try using them out.”

“That's something new since the last time I've been here. But what use do we have for that?”

“Well, it's an area of reference I guess.”

“Maybe someone is back there too. I think it's at least worth giving a look. Not like we have anything else at the moment.”

“Sure, we can check. Just don't touch anything, let me handle it.” I nod to her and she begins walking ahead of me down the path. As always, I diligently follow. I'm certain I don't know at least 80% of the materials here. Truly remarkable that one person could create it all. Well not a person. A God. This too, is the power of a God.

The view of the sample boxes come into vision. I'm not sure what it was going to look like but I certainly didn't guess this. This thing is massive, the entire back wall is covered in by box shaped doors. Unfortunately, it doesn't look like anything living is in the area. Coming down here was kinda pointless but at least I got to spend time with Aion. Spend time with Aion? Where'd that come from? Is Cass calling out to me? Is her body receiving signals from her mind? Where ever she is at the moment, I unfortunately can't help her. I need to be here with Aion or she'll suspect something is off. This is a peculiar position to be in.

Relative to the size of the wall, there's a small help desk in front of it. Various containers and safety equipment is stack on top of it. Aion get's to it first and starts picking at everything. Maybe she's looking for signs of recent use. She turns her attention to the wall, I assume she's doing the same thing to the boxes. I however, am going to use this opportunity to take a little break. I stretch, shooting my arms up and standing on my toes. I come back down and lean on the desk. Instantly, for a brief moment, the sound of an unknown voice enters my head.

“For the girl at the end of time. Glamorize into it, of the faded front.” I open my eyes and feel

almost detached from my body, like I'm being lifted out of it. I lift my arms off of the desk and my mind comes crashing back into my body. What an odd sensation. Did I just get spirited away or something? And the voice, whose voice was that? I mean it sounded somewhat similar to Cass but I know our voice well.

“Cass, tell me what this is.” I look at Aion, she's pointing down at the desk. In the middle of it is a strange map. I don't recognise it so I'm hoping if I can place some reliability on Cass' memory for this thing.

“Well, it's old that's for sure. It's definitely from Earth.”

“Impressive Cass, you stated the most obvious thing about it. Now what is it?” I roll my eyes in frustration at her. It's been like 15 seconds Aion, relax. This thing isn't going anywhere and neither are we.

“It's a map ok? It's a medieval European map influenced by Christians. See, look here at the top.” I point to where North should be.

“What tells you this? I don't get it. This thing looks like a mess.” Aion scoffs at it. It is a mess but that’s not important.

“Patience, Aion. Now listen to Professor Cassandra for a moment. The top of the map is East. You should know why. The story goes that Adam and Eve were kicked out of heaven, hence the rest of the world is East of Eden. This drawing of Jesus is at the top, accompanied by his angels. Nothing is above God so obviously he's at the top of the map.” I point at the top then run my finger down the map.

“So is there anything else? A hint or something?”

“Hmm well, the centre of the map is Jerusalem. I'm sure the reason is obvious for that. But it isn't just Christian influence on here. For instance, way down here in the bottom left are the English Isles. The top right in red is the Red Sea and it depicts the route the Israelites took during the story

Exodus. Jason's fleece is in the Black sea and on the right is The Nile River.” I point it all out for Aion and she stares down at it without an annoying comment this time.

“Cassandra, what are these creatures to the right of the river. This thing with a face on it's chest. What is it?”

“Oh, an Akephaloi. It's pretty much what you just said. It's a monster with a face on it's chest because it doesn't have a head. There are monsters scattered all throughout the edges of the map because those were parts of the world they didn't know and didn't want people venturing into. How do you keep people out into the great beyond? You tell them they’ll die if they do.” All the dangers are on the edges… that sounds a little familiar.

“So tell me Cassandra. If East is the closest to heaven, then west must be the closest to hell correct?”

“Yeah that sounds right.”

“And the edges of the map are scattered with various monsters of old. From inhuman beasts to creatures such as the minotaur and monocerus.”

“Right.”

“What direction did we travel down?”

“Well, Hephaestus said the samples were in all directions but East. I assume that’s because the entrance faces East.”

“And we went straight down the middle.”

“Yeah.”

“So sufficed to say, we went straight into hell and are now surrounded by monsters?” She nudges my arm with her elbow.

“Well, it's just an old map. The world has been cataloged and cartographed already. No men with faces on their chests were discovered.” This time Aion rolls her eyes at me and wanders back off

towards the wall. A cheeky little joke, courtesy of our foe.

“Thank you for the lesson Professor. I'm going to look for some gold to reward you with for all this brilliant information!” What she's really saying is I'm an idiot for listening to Hephaestus. Was he real? I feel like there's validity in his words because of what he said about his work with Chrono. Then was it all a trick by AO? The air behind me shifts, a powerful breeze pushes into me. Speak of the devil and ye shall receive. I turn around and rapidly approaching us is the floating figure from earlier. I can hear Aion returning from her browsing as she makes her way back to me. Suspended above us is AO once again. They wave at us and then throw their hands into the air as if they were cheering for something.

“Since I am a benevolent figure I will play this game with you.” They say to us.

“Oh another game? We’re having the time of our lives aren’t we Cass?” Aion sarcastically remarks.

“Since Aion is the previous winner, Cassandra my dear, I want you to play this time. You and only you!” They float past us and towards the elemental wall. “Pick a door out of these thousand doors. Only one door is the way out. The rest are punishment. I'm certain you learned what horrors lie within these Cass.” I’m familiar with what Hephaestus emphasised and the map showed. “That’s a .1% chance of correctly choosing Cass! Can you do it? Can you succeed under the pressure?!”

I look at the wall of doors before us, each is now numbered. The magic or I guess technology that powers this place is impressive. Some have diagrams and art on their covers. They all look incredibly detailed and articulate. I stare at a sea of unique designs. If anything, they're overwhelming me. I know nothing about elements past the first three, and I couldn't even say what the third one is.

“What? You're going to make her choose something like that? What kind of shitty game is this? At least make me choose, nothing here will harm me. Leave her out of this AO.”

“Oh no Aion, as I said, I’m playing this game with her. Cass, I’m going to wait until you choose. Please, go ahead.” Aion and AO are going at it but I need to keep them in the back of my head. A single door. A .1% chance to live. Well Cass, I'd say you've survived several .1% chances before so I feel a little lucky.

“This is ridiculous. Another stupid game when I could just slice them down with my blade.” Aion pouts.

“C'mon Aion, you spent a lot of time looking at the wall right? What door do you think is safe?”

“Well, if I had to choose, I’d pick 962. I just have a good feeling about that one. But I'd rather not play at all. What concerns me more is our opponent. AO, what are you playing at here?”

“Aion, I am playing the game. I want to assist Watson this round. How about this, I'm going to open every other door but the one I choose and the one Cass choses.” Aion and AO continue making up the rules as we go. I stare closely at every door I can get my eyes on. This one here is a lot less fancy than the others…

“Why would you do that?”

“Because I want you two to win.” AO smiles at us and Aion scoffs at the comment. It’s kinda funny. These two are the same side of the same coin. I think how it worked out is that the alternate Aion is the one who commands the personality. I don't recall hearing anything like this as The Watcher's behaviour. Despite it’s youthful appearance, it certainly wasn’t a helpful creature. Things grow curiouser and curiouser.

“AO, I'm ready to decide. I want door 427. What do you choose AO?”

“Excellent! Since I’m the game master and all that, I believe I’ll just choose the correct door. Number 888. ” Just choose the correct door? Is this a trick?

“What? Then why the hell are we playing if you’re just picking the right door?” Aion fire's off at AO.

“Because I want to see Watson’s decision. Who does she trust here more? Aion or I?” It was never about picking the door. I was about picking between these two. Cassandra would surely choose Aion, even if it meant they lose the game. To keep in line with my cover I too should choose Aion but I would hate to lose this game for such a simple reason.

“This is ridiculous AO. You know which door is correct. You’re forcing her to choose you.”

“Oh? Am I? Ha! Well perhaps you don’t even believe in her as much as you think you do!” AO gallantly shouts. Aion murmurs something under her breath, she didn’t like that. They want to hurt our trust in each other. Admittedly, we’ve not really had time to rebuild our relationship either. I wonder what Aion would do here. Would she go with her own choice or AO’s choice?

“You are no longer picking a random door, Watson. This is guaranteed. It’s much more likely that one of these doors are the correct ones. I’ve also eliminated 998 of them and told you my choice is the correct one. You should choose my door.” Their logic adds up. I’m being guaranteed by the game master that their door is correct. It’s so agonising. I’d be aligning myself with AO here. Aion’s already ticked off at the idea but if I go through with it that's adding fuel to the flame. On the other hand, if I choose wrong we get punished.

“Aion listen, logically speaking, AO has the correct door. I’d be a fool to not pick their door.”

“Logic, logic, logic, is that what you relied on at the End of Time?” She scoffs again and turns around. This is so childish. Why are we behaving like this? The line between Cassandra and I is fading away. Her voice is the one in my head because this isn't my head. Glamorize into it, of the faded front. If I listen to this voice then I've chosen right. I trust Cass.

“I'm staying with my door AO. Open 427.” The smile that previously sat on their face was evaporating away.

“What are you doing Cass? I have given you the answer. Why do you stick with the wrong choice?”

“My choice is more exciting, that's all. If we get punished then bring the punishment on. You'd be a fool to think I'm not going to try out the more interesting way.” AO tilts their head to my right, looking down at me. If I didn't know better I'd say they were sulking right now.

“Alright Cass made her choice. Open the damn door so we can move on AO.” They snap their fingers and door 427 opens. Nothing is inside it. I guess that means I won.

“Move on to what exactly, Aion?” AO replies.

“To getting rid of you and leaving with the tesseract.” Aion smugly answers.

“Oh? But there's still so much to do! I still have many games for you to play Aion! Cass!” I look at Aion. She gives me an annoyed glance. I'd like to get back so I can sleep all day under Cassandra's control. This proved an interesting distraction but I'm over it now. I need to find a way to bring her mind back without Aion discovering she's been gone the whole time.

“Hey Cass, would you get a little closer to Aion?” I look back up. AO is pointing down at a spot I assume is next to Aion.

“Oh, yeah sure. Why not?” I walk over to Aion and nudge her shoulder. I suppose believing in Cass is also believing in Aion so it probably looked good that I made the choice that I did.

“Excellent!” AO snaps their fingers in Aion-like fashion and suddenly we start falling.

“What the fuck!?” Aion shouts up. I can see AO's figure shrink as we drop.

“Did we just get tricked? By that?!” She's still shouting. I think her patience has run its course. A trap door. How silly. Well, silly as long as there isn't a pit of deadly spikes at the bottom of the drop.

“Let's just hope we don't die at the bottom Aion! You don't have authority anymore remember? If one of us gets hurt we can't turn back time!”

ζ΄

“How have you been adjusting to time on Earth? Twenty four hours in a day, your single constraint.” A female voice breaks the silence. I tilt my head back on the couch to find the intruder.

“Kairos! You're back!” I reply.

“You solve everything so quickly! I haven’t closed so many cases in my life Aion.”

“Oh please. It’s not like I'm doing a better job than Chrono did.”

“Nonsense. You're doing so much better it's not even funny. He would let work pile up until The Archon made him work!”

“In that case, I am doing a much better job than Chrono. Continue to praise me!” I say smiling at her. Kairos smiles back at me. I get up off of the couch and stretch.

“Keep it up and there won’t be anything left to do. Although, I suppose there are worse problems in the universe to have.” She replies.

“Well I had such a good mentor, I can't help but do a perfect job.” She covers her mouth as she laughs, walking off into the lobby.

“Is Morrigan not here today?” She asks.

“No, she hasn't been around at all lately. Probably out somewhere throwing every death flag imaginable at some hero, saying to not go into battle or they're going to die miserably.”

“Well she can't make them stop. Her sagely advice should suffice but you know humans.”

“Yeah, morons through and through. Anyways, what did you come here for?”

“I just wanted to see how you're enjoying the fort, so to speak.” She wanders over to the bar and starts pulling out various bottles. The sound of glass clinking onto one another is a sound I now frequent with Kairos.

“It's great. Thank you again for inviting me and letting me use The Chrononaut. Although could we maybe change the first part of the name? I dislike having to say his name.” Laughter from behind the counter erupts. A cup flies out onto the bar, ice falls in and various liquids pour into the cup.

“Want one?” She offers. I decline.

“Come, sit with me Aion. I'd like to ask you something.” Kairos wraps around from the counter and returns to the lobby. She takes a seat on the couch across of the one I got off of. I sit back down. What is she going to ask I wonder? Not like there’s much left for me to do these days.

“Although I'm glad you're fully enjoying the Phantasm, I'm curious as to why you aren't with the other Ministry members. The base at Aulis serves all members, except for the Goddess of Time, or so I've heard.”

“That's...” I don't have a good reason to give her. I'm not overly fond of being around them. In fact I dislike being around them all together. Should I just be honest about it?

“Go on, it's not like you're in trouble. I'm just curious as to why you spend all your time here instead of there.” She pushes me to answer.

“It's very evident I’ve been forced into this role. They clearly liked him and when I replaced him it ruined whatever chemistry they had going on together. It's uncomfortable.”

“What about Morrigan? She’s unable to help?”

“More like she can't. Cordelia is an asshole. Eris is crazy. Cassiel is always gone. Ceres just agrees with whatever is most popular. Morrigan tries but they're so set in their ways. The party literally dies when I show up.”

“Do I need to have a talk with them?”

“Kairos, no man what the heck? We complete our work just fine, we don't need to be all buddy buddy..”

“Well I've already arranged it for you anyways.” She takes a swig of her drink and looks away.

“What do you mean arranged it? Kairos?!”

“Aion, I need you to be a part of the team. I don't have an infinite amount of time like you and Chrono. I can't always be around for you.”

“But Chrono will be! And Morrigan too!”

“Aion c'mon. Can't you at least try?”

“I've done nothing but try Kairos. I can't make them want to get along or talk to me.”

“I get that Aion. Look, can you do this for me? Give it one more shot?” I can't believe she's treating this as if I were some loner who needs friends. We're Gods. We do our jobs. What else could we possibly need from each other than to know we're all doing what we need to do?

“I've opened up the reception area. There will be five rooms that branch out into five unique Phantasms. Each one will be for a different Ministry member as well as a portal to their location, should you ever need to get in touch with them.” Kairos says. There’s a what in the what? How did she do all that? I never saw her come or go. Did she do it while I was sleeping?

“Kairos when and how did this happen?”

“It happened when I caught you sleeping in your room for the past 15,000 years.” Geh?! She's calling that out?

“I'm doing my job man. What's the problem if I sleep when everything is done?”

“Aion you're missing out. That's 15,000 years worth of human progress and you wouldn't be able tell me a single thing that happened during that span. Every other member is deeply in tune with the workings of humanity except you.”

“I don't think that's fair to say. I'm extremely hard on myself. I make sure my work is done so nobody has to worry about it. Sure I didn't see them go to space or I didn't see the invention of fire. So what?”

“Being stringent on your tasks isn’t going to make up for missing the other half of your job Aion.”

“I… that’s…” I have no rebuttal for that. I don't understand why she is upset despite me doing what I need to do.

“Show up a little more. Don’t be a stranger.” More sagely advice from my mentor.

“Kairos I mean, I have Morrigan. I have Chrono. I'll be fine.”

“I just don't want to see you alone at the End of Time, Aion.” What a cheesy line, Kairos.

“Fine, I got it. I'll try again. There's no way around it if they're all here right?”

“Thank you Aion.” Kairos gets up and returns to the back side of the counter. I guess I should get ready for some guests. I need to take a shower, I've been lazing about the past couple of days.

“I'm gonna wash up, will you be ok without me Kairos?”

“I will be fine dear. I'm just glad I didn't need to tell you to do that too.” She smirks at me before taking a good swig of her drink. Do I smell?

“Yeah, yeah.” I wave at her and head down the hall to my room. I hop into the bathroom and take all of my clothes off. I can't believe I'm going to be seeing all the girls again. That fills my stomach with a sense of dread more than anything. Morrigan will be there at least. Kairos might also stick around to mediate things. Do they really, truly, lament in losing Chrono as a member? It's not like he died, he's still around. Why don't they just go and see him if it's such a big deal to them?

I start the water and step inside. It's so peculiar that Kairos wants us to get along too. It's rare for any of us at all to get along, let alone want to be friends with one another. If anything, acting independently for so long has been a good thing. We get by without each other just fine. I’m fine without them but that brings me back to the centre of Kairos' issue. Hopefully Morg can do the heavy lifting for me again because I am going to struggle. That's a little bit in the direction she wants me to go though right? I can't do this alone so I need Morg and one day I'll need the rest of

the girls? I finish washing my body and exit the shower.

With a few bare and wet steps onto the floor, I can hear some insane cackling traveling down from the lobby. This one, I can deal with her. She's easy. Eris likes chaos, craziness and cuisine. I head into my room and throw an outfit on. I wonder if speeding up time to dry my hair would make it look like I'm trying to avoid the others to Kairos. Guess I'll just go out like this. I make my way back to the lobby.

“Aion! Wazzup bro!” I halfheartedly wave at her. She's sitting at the bar with Kairos.

“Hey, Eris. Looks like you're getting acquainted with some of our finer facilities.” She sets her drink down and slides it over to my seemingly less and less responsible mentor.

“Oh yeah, it's great dude. When Kairos told me about making this our headquarters I was super excited. I like the idea of a central hub where we can work together.” I'm surprised that she's for the idea. Although, Eris is one of the more reasonable girls, despite being the embodiment of Chaos. If she's here then Cassie should be here too. I guess that'll make for decent conversation.

“I'm glad you're on board. Say, if you don't mind me asking, where's Cassie at?”

“Cassie stayed behind to bring some stuff with her. Soda, pop, all the fizzy drink she can get her hands on. You know how much she loves the stuff. Kairos told her there wasn’t any here and she started hyperventilating. Such a goof.” I had heard Cassie liked soda but I didn't think she would stay behind just to bring some. Hell, I would've gotten it for her if I knew before hand.

“What about the others? Have you talked to Ceres or Cordelia recently?” The sound of glass sliding on wood answers before she gets a chance. She catches the cup in her left hand and moves it up to take a drink. She shakes her head and sets the cup down.

“Haven't seen those two in awhile, they don't stick around in any one place very often. Benefit of being nearly complete with their jobs I guess. What about you Kairos? You had to find them to invite us all so you've probably seen them more recently than I.” Eris finishes speaking and Kairos

nods approvingly.

“They were together actually. The first two I came across and asked.” She replies.

“Oh and what did they say. No?” I curiously ask her.

“Both of them were for the idea and they agreed to come Aion.”

“Well there you go! The entire Ministry will be together for the first time! This is so exciting!” Eris lifts her cup back up and chugs the rest of her drink. I can't believe those two agreed. Ceres maybe, maybe. But Cordelia? Kairos has done nothing short of performing a miracle to receive that girl's approval.

“Hey!” A voice calls from the newly opened reception room. Eris leaps out of her seat and runs towards the sound. The sound of two very excited women screaming bestie at each other follows the echoing footsteps. Kairos pulls out another cup and puts some ice into it.

“Want one, Aion? I foresee many drinks about to be poured.” Kairos says as Cassiel comes into the room with Eris glued to her hips. Both of them have arms behind one another, they're wheeling in a wagon full of soda.

“What the heck Cassiel? All that?” I'm unsettled by the amount of soda she brought in. How can a single being drink this much?

“All of this and regular trips to Earth for more when I finish it.” She replies jubilantly. Kairos travels out from the bar to Cassie who is holding her hand out with a bag carrying some of the drinks.

“I reckon it might be easier to get some syrup of the brands you like and we’ll put a tap in just for you Cassie dear. Jerry-rig a personal dispenser for you.” Kairos takes the bag with her while leaving her suggestion behind.

“Oh a personal tap, could we actually get something like that Kairos?” Cassie asks. I'm a little curious myself. I'd rather have a tap than store all this like we're sugar addicts.

“We can synthesise the syrup down to the exact taste and making the carbonator should be a simple task if we ask Hephaestus. Could even set it back here with the rest of the drinks and carbonate all sorts of things.” Cassie is absolutely beaming at Kairos. The two start handling all the soda that arrived. I didn't know Kairos was a fan of that stuff, I hardly see her drink it. Eris takes a seat at the bar again, waiting for the evening service to resume. I wonder what they were doing on Earth before arriving here.

“So, who wants a soda mix for their next drink?” Kairos asks. Eris and Cassie both raise their hands at the same time. Kairos hands the cup of ice to Cassie and she takes a seat next to her wife. This isn't so bad actually. These two, I can manage. Cassie and Eris are like Morrigan and I. They're just a bit more out loud about it. I wonder if we were confident like them, would that be for better or worse?

“Yo, you guys here yet?” Another voice from the other room. I know who this is and I want to know why the hell he's here.

“Of course we're here, we live here.” I shout back in response. The other girls are pretending not to hear. They're mingling among themselves, mixing their drinks and leaving me as the only one able to get him. I mean, he could just come here himself. He's already invited himself. I exit the lobby into the hall to the reception area and spot three people standing in the middle. These two came with him. Or did he come with them? I suppose that makes some sense.

“Aion. How are you?” Ceres speaks up first. She always does, she's like Cordelia's secretary. Chrono excuses himself from in between the two and approaches me.

“We ran into each other just as I was coming here. Now we're all here together, let's have some drinks shall we?” He hurries into the lobby, leaving me behind with these two. This guy, I'm going to have some choice words for him later.

“Ceres, Cordelia, glad to see you accepted the invitation. I'm well, how are the two of you?”

“Aion.” Cordelia says at she nods her head at me and follows the path into the lobby.

“Aion, we have things to discuss. It's unavoidable because they're time related and Chrono deferred to you. We'll be depending on your expertise. Now, let's not keep the others waiting and join them shall we?” I nod at Ceres and she continues behind Cordelia. The entire conversation is controlled by them. Whatever input I had wouldn’t have mattered because they had already decided what to do.

“Everyone here now?” Kairos asks.

“Morrigan is still out. Not sure when she'll be back either.” She stops in place and I stop next to her.

“That's fine, you can catch her up whenever she arrives. Everyone already knows apart from you two so we'll get to discussing it quickly then get out of your way.” Kairos says. Ceres starts walking towards the bar and Kairos wanders over to take her order. Everyone else already knows? Including Chrono? But he deferred whatever is going on to me? I wonder what's going on.

“Keep em' coming Kairos! One for my girl Cordelia here! She needs it, her job is so boring you'd have to drag me screaming all the way to do what she does!” Eris is shouting even louder than usual, she's already drunk. Cordelia seems fine with it though. Cassiel is laughing, Kairos is keeping busy. I spy Chrono alone on the couches across the bar. I guess we can get this important chat started.

“Chrono.” I get his attention and slide my hand over the top of the couch behind him and grab the seat at the end opposite of him.

“Aion. Looks like everyone accepted your invitation.”

“Yeah, so let's get to how you arrived with those two and talk about what work you deferred to me.” I finish speaking and Chrono starts taking a drink from his cup.

“They happened to be in Leng at the same time as I was. They mentioned some sort of space

event happening sooner than it should have.”

“I haven’t heard about any event occurring out of place.” I reply. He shrugs his shoulders, staring at me with an uncertain look on his face.

“I can't say either but if there's a possible issue, I'd like you to handle it. I'm still busy with my own work.” He says. I can hear the uncertainty in his voice. He looks off. Not his usual confident self.

“And what work is that Chrono?”

“I’ve recently got Hephaestus on board to start building some models I worked out.”

“Models of what? For what?” I ask.

“Bodies strong enough to-”

“Chrono, Aion. Ready to talk?” Cordelia and Ceres appear, cutting Chrono off in the middle of whatever he was talking about.

“Oh, of course. Right Aion?” Chrono glances at me with the worry wiped off of his face and his typical smile back.

“Yeah, it's fine. What are we going to discuss?” The two ladies set their drinks down on the table next to us and take seats on the couch across from us.

“Aion, I've been keeping an eye on odd events occurring in far out areas of space colonised by humans.” Cordelia stares at me while speaking. She's not acting out or ignoring me, this is indeed an odd event.

“Odd how? What's odd about these humans?” I reply.

“They’re just vanishing. No violence, no war, not by any catastrophic meteors.” Cordelia snaps her finger to illustrate it… I guess… I’m confused. This doesn't sound like a time issue to me.

“Cordelia, if I may. Ceres you too. We each have roles right?” I say and the two nod at me.

“Cordelia your focus is space, the great beyond and unfamiliar. Ceres, you manage the flora and

fauna of planet Earth, the close to home and familiar. What does vanishing life on some random planets out in space have to do with me?" I finish speaking and look back and forth between the two of them. Neither of them offer a response.

"I'll chime in for that actually Aion." Chrono speaks up for the two. Maybe he thinks this is the path of least resistance. Although we're keeping behaved so far. I feel like we can have a discourse between ourselves if tempers stay moderate.

"These catastrophes aren't supposed to be happening at all. There's no record for them." He says.

"How do you know there's no record for them?" As I finish speaking, the three of them shoot glances at each other. Ok, this is starting to get suspicious. Chrono is still a God of Time, he would know if something radically out of place happened. What do they really need me for need me for?

"Aion, we want to work together on this one. That's all." Ceres chimes in for the other two. Both Chrono and Cordelia are comfortably drinking out of their glasses. I don't think i've ever dealt with these three at the same time. C, C, C. Too many C names here. That's not even to mention the other one.

"We mutually decided on it when Kairos approached us Aion. An opportunity to practice some unity between all of us. I, we, acknowledge that we haven't been as hospitable to you as we should have been. Chrono spoke to us about it as well." Ceres finish speaking and it prompts Chrono to set his drink back down then he points a finger at me.

"Hell yeah! I put in a good word for you Aion. You'd be wise to get along all together now." He picks his drink back up and smugly takes in more of it. This annoying bastard.

"Chrono, why don't you just go stand over on that side of the room and get back to breathing with your mouth or something?" I point towards the reception area.

"He is right Aion. There's a darkness out there that none of us have any experience with. I'd just like if we could, for at least the time being, get along?" Ceres speaks up again. I suppose the whole

point of inviting them here is to learn how to work together.

“Entire populations are vanishing and we have no reason as to how or why yet. I'd like to coordinate the intervals in time between ones that have vanished. Perhaps will find a trend and see if we can't catch the next one before it happens. Of course, we’d also like to possibly even discover the catalyst of the events. We would like you to join us, Aion.” Cordelia asks me so earnestly, I feel like I have to say yes. I am ahead on all of my work, I don't have much going on right now. I guess we could work together.

“Alright, if it's for the team, I'll take a look at things for you guys.” I give her my answer.

“Thank you Aion. I propose a toast. To a new, complete Ministry.” Cordelia raises her glass after speaking and as if right on cue, Kairos comes by and hands me a drink. I take the drink and keep it raised. The others at the bar rush over and raise their glasses with us. We clink into one another and shout “Cheers,” to mark the occasion. I take a small sip of my drink and down the hall from my room a voice calls.

“Aion? Is Kairos over today? Who are you speaking to? Should I put my clothes back on?” Oh shit! I totally forgot about Morrigan. I have her set to arrive in my room when she returns. And her clothes? Did the other hear that…

“Heh, if you guys would excuse me real quick.” My nervous laughter carries into me bowing out of the discussion to go to my room. I head inside a quickly shut the door. Just as she said, she's in her underwear with her cloak open!

“Morg! Hey, I'm glad to see you back and your front but, this kinda isn't the time!” I exclaim to her as I rush up to her and give her a hug.

“Aion? What's going on? Kairos is here isn't she? Shit, I should put my clothes back on.” Morg let's go of me and spins around, walking to the closet.

“Yeah but not just her, all of the girls are here today.” I reply.

“Today?! Everyone is here?!” Her words travel 180 degrees as she practically spins her head around to look at me in shock.

“Well, I don't think it was a set date but they're all here right now. We were discussing our new found…teamwork initiative. Oh and drinking.” I finish speaking and quietly open the door up. Hopefully I can steal a peak at what's going on down the hall. I can see the bar from here but nobody is sitting at the right most chair. I guess things are going smoothly without me.

“Everyone's here? Everyone everyone?” She says as the sound of footsteps travel with her words behind me.

“Everyone. The entire Ministry is in one place. Crazy right?” I shut the door and turn to face her.

“Cordelia and Ceres… How'd you pull that off?” She asks. I reach for her hands with mine and hold them.

“Well long story short, something bad is going on out in the universe and Cordelia is asking me to help discover what it is.” I smile at her. She smiles back but with a slight look of confusion on her face.

“The universe? What does that have to do with time?” I shrug my shoulders at her question.

“I don't know man. We're supposed to be building teamwork and camaraderie I guess. It can't hurt to check. Plus Kairos went out of her way to gather everyone so I don't want to make her look bad by getting pissy.” My words make Morrigan smirk at me and she moves into my face. I tilt my head for her.

“Can't make her look bad now can you?” She whispers at me. I feel the air from her mouth press onto my lips. I hate this part. No words. Just kiss me.

“Yeah. But there's only one thing I want to look at right now.” I whisper back. She lets go of my hands and wraps them around my back. I do the same and we press our bodies into one another.

“What's that?” She teasingly responds.

“Your naked body on top of my face.” Before she gets a chance to respond I push my lips into hers and we become one. I shut my eyes and she passionately kisses me back. Our lips and spit and tongues mix around together because I let her. She invades my mouth and sucks on my tongue because I let her. She bites down onto my lip because I let her. My heart flutters, this is my woman here is my safe place. Together this is our home. With her here, I can do anything.

“Aion?” A shout from up the hall? I pull my face away and rest my forehead on hers. Slowly, my eyes open back up. She puts a hand on my head and I lean into her palm.

“I guess… we should go see everyone else?” I whisper to her.

“We'll have plenty of time for each other later. Let's go catch up with everyone.” Morg pets me at the end of her sentence. She pulls her hand back and reaches for the door. She looks back at me and nods her head at the hall.

“Let's go.” She says. We head out together. The laughter from the bar is more audible, sounds like everyone is have a good time without us. I wonder if we even need to be around. Morrigan exits the hall first and Eris leaps out of her chair and into Morg's arms.

“Morrigan! Where'd you come from!? You're missing out on all the drinks!” Eris excitedly exclaims to Morg. I look over at the bar as I exit the hall. The thing is littered with empty cups. There must be a dozen for both Eris and Cassiel. Kairos waves at me, a cup of her own in hand. Several empty bottles of soda litter the ground around the bar. The girls certainly know what they like.

“Eris my dear! Great to see you!” Morrigan says to Eris. The girl beams up at Morrigan and everyone else gets up to greet her. This is good, everyone loves Morg. I just need to be a team player and nod and agree with whatever Cordelia says and we'll all have a great time. The others walk her to the bar while the three I was previously chatting with return to the couch. I guess I'll sit with them.

“She appears in your room?” Ceres asks with a raised eyebrow.

“Of course she appears in my room, she's my partner after all. Not going to have her show up anywhere else.” That's good Aion. Own it. They can't turn it on you if you own it.

“Ah, right, of course. Well, I hope she takes her shoes off before showing up.” Ceres smiles at me and the other two laugh a little. I stare at a gap in the couch across from me.

Annoying.

“Would you three like another drink?” Kairos suddenly appears next to us with a tray. She lowers it down for the others and they each grab one for themselves and replace the cups with their empty ones.

“Thank you, Kairos.” Ceres speaks up for the other two and they all smile, returning to their drinks.

“Hey Aion, may I privately speak with you for a moment?” Kairos says while looking at me. She flicks her head toward the bar and I nod at her.

“Oh, yeah sure.” I reply, waving at the three and get up to follow my mentor. The bar is noisy with Cassiel and Eris goofing off with Morrigan. I guess I kinda forget that by keeping Morg all to myself gives the other girls less chances to hang out with her. This group living situation might actually benefit us in other ways. The three girls all wave at me. I smile and wave back at them.

“Not so bad huh?” Kairos asks me. She situates herself back behind the bar. I join her and lean against the cabinet of drinks on the wall.

“It's not bad. Not at all. Did you know this was going to happen? Read into our futures or something?” I tease her a little.

“As Day One to all of this, it’s gone about as well as it could've. Say, Aion, what did they tell you. Why they're here and all that?” I look at Kairos in surprise. They didn't tell her? Maybe the issue Cordelia discovered is fairly recent. Or maybe they haven't gotten the chance. Chrono

supposedly found out before arriving so I guess it's not too strange nobody else knows.

“Well apparently, some worlds out in space are seeing their populations of life vanish. Cordelia wants time frames of when it happens and through that we might be able to predict the next time that it will happen.” I hadn't noticed while speaking since I was staring at Kairos but out of the corner of my eye I spy that Morg had crept her way over to our side of the bar. I quietly laugh and wave at her to move in closer.

“Did you catch all that?” I ask her.

“Yeah I got it. Planets dying in space or whatever. Is that something she is able to notice? People dying or whatever? Sounds like that's something Thanatos or Hades would have to manage.” Morg finishes speaking and I agree with what she says.

“Well, space is her domain. She knows what she's doing.” I finish speaking and look at the other two. For the first time ever, all of us are in one place. Even if it's a loose alliance, we're together.

“I'll just do whatever they need. It's no big deal really. Kairos, a couple more drinks will ya?” She nods at my request and spins around. Morg on the other hand, is still staring at me.

“What’s up?” I ask her.

“I like all the girls equally but c'mon Aion. Cordelia pretty much refused all contact with you. Everything from her had to go through Ceres didn’t it? And now you're going to do some work for her? What's with the flip in attitude?” I shrug at her questions. Kairos returns with a couple of drinks and hands them to the two of us.

“I understand where you're coming from Morg and it's fortunate that the two over there are loud enough to keep this conversation confined to just us. But you're all together now, that's a victory.” Kairos says to Morrigan and I find myself agreeing.

“I guess you're right Kairos. I never thought I'd see the day Aion and Cordelia acknowledge each other. Let's gather everyone and chat together. Aion do we have any food prepared?” Morg asks me

as she rolls up her sleeves. It seems she already knows the answer.

“I can grab some stuff and we can set the grills up.” I start rummaging underneath the counter for said items.

“Is there any safe stuff for Ceres?” Morg says as she steps away.

“Don’t we have that fridge without the meat on the far end?” I shout from under the bar, grabbing one of the grills to pull up.

“Perfect. Let's do it!” Morrigan shouts.

“Let's!” I shout back at her.

“Aion!” Kairos shouts at me.

“What's up, you want something extra Kairos?” I lift my head to look at her. She nods her head at me and smiles.

“It's time.”

η΄

"Aion, this area… Something isn't right. It's not natural." I can feel it. I've never encountered an environment like this. It's done by Gods, yet similar to creatures like myself. This is The Watcher's… No… Alpha Omega's domain.

"Yeah. Yeah, it's different to say the least." She quietly replies. She must know, maybe she even had a part in having it created.

"The wind it's not natural. It's following a pace. Like the world itself is breathing. The flowers flow back and forth with the inhale and exhale. The positions of these rocks are way too coordinated, like they were set up by something. The birds chirping it's followed by the sound of a tape recorder. Aion what is this place? It's like a replica of the Garden outside of Tintagel."

"You picked it up quicker than most detective. Look, just don't acknowledge anything here. Like when we first arrived, don't touch anything. This is an area we shouldn't be in so let's just get moving." Aion tenses up for a moment. Is it to prepare herself or because she was feeling creeped out too? We press our steps forward into the ground, I can't help but stare left and right at our surroundings. I mean it's beautiful. The clear sky, the shining sun, the breeze that pushes the flowers back and forth. It's picture perfect. But don't acknowledge anything here, what does that mean?!

"It's a graveyard." Aion says.

"What!? A graveyard?" I reply.

"Yeah. I don't know, some weird set up they had. To look to the future, you must see the past. Something like that, just stay calm." Aion says. Is she telling that to me or is she telling herself?

"AO intentionally sent us here. Do they want us to see something?" I ask.

"Who knows why they do what they do. Maybe that has something to do with it?" Aion points

into the distance.

There's some sort of landmark that stands out. It looks like an obelisk.

“What is it exactly? Is that where we need to go?” I ask.

“In the centre of the world is a reminder of glory and power. Let's go.” She says, walking towards the monument.

“Glory and power? Who does it belong to?” I ask Aion but it seems she's ignoring me.

She's walking deeper into the area. This is absurd, she's refusing to share information despite the situation we're in? The situation we've firmly dug ourselves into and are now entrenched in. Cassandra might stay silent but I’m not putting up with this half answer bullshit. I run over to Aion and shove her.

“Watson, what the hell? Why are you pushing me?” Aion snaps at me and turns around.

“No, what the hell is up with you? Are you not aware of our situation Aion? I want some damn answers.” I snap back at her.

“You don't need any answers. You just need to do as I say.” She returns fire.

“I don't need to do anything. We've gone through so much together. It's annoying that, despite being with you the entire way, you're treating me like a moron. Why am I here if I'm not going to be a part of anything that happens. Our enemy has been more thoughtful of me than you!” My shouting dissipates into the silent atmosphere. How do you put up with this Cass. I know I remarked on it earlier but constantly being ignored or pushed aside, how do you let yourself be sidelined in your own story?

“Well, aren't you going to say something? Anything? You're just standing there like you're too cool for the situation. You're always like that. What the hell man.” I finish speaking, hoping she'll offer some sort of serious conversation. Anything. She's so annoying and I'm sick of putting up with it. *Me*, of all people. This facade is turning me soft. If this ruins their relationship so be it.

“This isn't the time for complaining.” Her six word reply is all I receive for putting Cassandra's feelings out there.

“What the fuck do you mean it isn't the time. Aren't you the God of Time? Make some so we can talk Aion.” I taunt her. I need something to happen.

“Make time? Sure Cass, let's take a moment to talk about this area so you don't screw up like in my room.” Aion says in a contemptuous tone. That got her to react more than anything else so far. I guess I'll just keep taunting then.

“All high and mighty until you're faced with a problem, then I'm the one who needs to deal with things. Why don't we just leave? We got what we needed from this place and as a bonus the other girls have been sent home. Are we seriously unable to leave because AO made you look foolish and now you need to get back at them?” I stop speaking. Aion only bursts into laughter as a response. We sit in an awkward silence. This is stupid, I'm going on without her then. Not like *I* need Aion. I can manage myself just fine. I'll find a way out of here. Hell, I have the body all to myself now. I guess I should be grateful to her. I'm getting away with the greatest heist in the history of the universe. But my heart aches at the thought. I feel sadness. Frustration. Fear. Cassandra and I are too intertwined now. The more time we spent together the more alike we became. I hate it.

I walk ahead of Aion, I'll do it my way until she wants to cooperate. If she wants to cooperate. The obelisk may be of use. If I touch it will, Cassandra return? What is it for? Why is it here? If Aion weren't such a stuck up bitch I wouldn't have to wonder trivial things like this but instead I am simply the fool walking blind. Situations I don't have the upper hand with are unpleasant but, compared to a situation where information is wilfully withheld, is gross negligence on her part.

Although I decided to go on my own, she didn't. I can hear her footsteps behind me. This is so weird. What could be going through that mind of hers right now? There has to be something more but I’m at a loss. I don't know anything more than Cass does. That's really sad actually. All there is

to do is walk and think. She won't talk so I won't cooperate. Maybe I should just stop thinking. Turn my brain off until we get to whatever the fuck we're here for.

Despite my insistence on being on my own, we arrive at a lone bench on the way to the obelisk. Seeing it from a distance is definitely a testament to how large it is. The closer we get the more it grows. Hmm, if I kill the owner does, that make it mine? A symbol of my power gah hah hah.

“Hey.” A voice calls out to me, pulling me from my musings. Well, isn't this something. Is she finally ready to talk?

“Cass, take a look at this. I think this is some sort of record book of everyone who's come through.” Aion lifts it up and flips through the pages. Her expression remains the same, back to her normal attitude it seems. Some talking is better than none I suppose. Although, I don't know if I would discover anything she can’t. It wouldn’t hurt to check, Cass probably won’t recognise anything but I might.

“A record book? Sure, let me see. What about not interacting with anything here?” Aion scoffs and holds out the book. I open it up and let the pages slide down my thumb as I try to estimate a page count. Records of everyone who has come through spans across thousands of pages. It’s impressive that it’s all in this little notebook sized recording device.

“Let me know if you find anything interesting in it. I'm gonna walk around and see if there's anything else lingering around.” I nod at her and she walks into the faux meadow.

It looks pretty standard. Names on the right and photos on the left of every visitor. I skim through the front to back, hoping something will catch my eye. But it's just that, a book of records. Nobody stands out. I don't recognise any names. I'd actually be more surprised at myself if I recognised any names. I stare at the cover and flip it over. While I flip the pages back to the front, I can see a woman standing in the distance. Aion?

She's standing there doing nothing. No, it's not Aion. This feels like AO. The figure of their body

isn’t so small anymore. It's just watching me. True to The Watcher’s name. It puts it's hands together and then splits them apart as if something was opened up. The right hand opens its palm up and their left hand pulls from left to right three times. Are these instructions? Something's on the third page? Their final movement is a finger running across their neck. How curiously morbid.

I follow as instructed, turning to the third page and looking at the list of names. Ah, I see now. That's what this book is. A collection of obituaries. Interesting that this is a physical record of data rather than electronic like everything else. I set the book of death down onto the bench. Let's see what you have for me next AO.

Walking towards the figure in the distance, I can start to make out more of their features. They look like Aion but I know she’s a fake. Just as I look like Cassandra but I am not her either. A couple of monsters dressed up in bags of meat to trick our foes. The closer I get to AO the closer I am to the obelisk as well. Touching the book surprisingly did nothing. I guess I should've tried the bench too but hey, I need an excuse to see this monument.

“Yo.” The voice calls out to me.

“Yo.” I respond in kind and even wave.

“You're not the one I'm looking for, are you?” I'm asked a question they certainly know the answer to.

“Afraid not. Your girl is out at the moment but you can leave a message with me.” I respond. They smirk at the end of my sentence.

“Coming here didn't trigger her return?” AO asks. I shake my head left to right to answer their question.

“Unfortunately, it’s just me right now. A real shame too. I'm more of the napping type. I don't like doing things for this girl. I don't suppose you have any way of changing that?” I ask a question of my own. Getting Cass back would be more than ideal, for everyone here.

“If she's still a part of the system then I know what will wake her up. Come with me.” AO begins to walk away. Guess I'll follow and see what will happen.

“Do you get what this area is now? Seeing the list of names. The graves. The obelisk?” They continue speaking.

“Well, you gave me more info than Aion did. I can fathom a guess. I snuck into the other version after all.” I reply.

“Ah, right. That's how you got our fledgling *Chrononaut*. What an interesting twist of fate that has led us to this final meeting.”

“I wouldn't call it interesting. I've done well enough with the situation I've ended up in. Can you say the same, Watcher?”

“I care not for competition Nyarlathotep, only body you possess. There is something I must still do.”

We find ourselves ever closer to the precipice of the unknown. It's an exhilarating feeling. Something out here fills me with anticipation. I even look forward to feeling Cassandra's presence once more. I ball my right hand into a fist and reopen it. The last time I touched something, nothing happened. If I touch this marble monument, will we connect again? I hope so. Although, I wonder if her being away has ended up doing more harm than good. Well, we're just about at the base of the towering object, let's find out together. Shall we Cass?

“Before you touch the obelisk, tell me something.” I turn around to oblige their request. They gave me some knowledge so I suppose I can do the same in return.

“Ask away. I have no reason to hide anything.” I respond. Looking down further beyond from where we had traveled, I see Aion making her way to us. You can handle that Cass. I'm ready for some rest.

“Why not just take the body and leave? Was that not your goal?” They ask me. I can understand a

question like that.

“Why? Well I suppose I've grown quite fond of Miss. Watson. Her charm is mystifying. We have something of a balance and that's not something I often get to experience. Not to say that I haven't thought of leaving but what is the point of that this late into the game? Her masters would hunt me down to the end of time. I don't need that noose hanging over my head. It's easier teasing her and sleeping all day in her head.”

“Gya hah hah, I think she's rubbed off on you more than you know. Didn't imagine this is how the great Nyarlathotep behaved.”

“Is it maddening? To have your expectations shatter so swiftly.” I ask them, curious to hear the answer.

“I don't care for such things. As I said, it is not you who carries my interest. I'm well aware of the fact I can do nothing to counter the will of the Outer Gods. I want the *Chrononaut*.” Tch, didn't take that like I thought they would but oh well. I guess that's all for my part. Hope you got enough rest Cassandra, this last challenge is all yours. I place my right hand on the pillar. I leave AO with a smile.

“It's time!” I shout and the feeling from Aion's room returns. I shouted? Why did I do that?

Don't think about it, I helped make your grand entrance.

My grand entrance? What does that mean? Hey, what the hell have you been up to?

We share a brain idiot, just think about it.

I gain the knowledge of the situation Aion and *I* are in. Goodness, where do I even start with these two. But perhaps it's not these two that need immediate action, the one standing across from me is the one I need to deal with.

You go do that. I'll be catching up on some sleep. Don't come bothering me if you start losing either.

Heh, yeah, yeah. Go rest up. Good job getting this far.

“We finally meet.” I tell the figure opposite of me.

“Cassandra. I'm glad we finally, get to meet.” The sound of steps crashing into the ground arises. Oh well, there she is now. Aion.

“You, hey you. What did you mean we finally meet?” Aion stands in the middle of AO and I, asking the question.

“We finally meet, what is confusing about that? I'm going to start taking things seriously from here on out. Do you know what that means Aion?” AO finishes speaking, leaving a question for Aion as rebuttal.

“Enlighten me.” Aion responds.

“I have one final task but it wouldn't be fair to our guest here without putting her on equal footing. As I understand it, she's kept unaware of her situation and that doesn't sit right with me. I will challenge her after she learns.” I can see AO's words make Aion put a troubled look on her face. Equal footing? What is that about?

“Come now and speak more with me. Aren't you curious, Cassandra?”

“About what exactly, AO?”

“I know you have seen my truth. Experienced things from a long time ago in a place not too different from this Leng. Correct?” I nod my head with her question. The life of the other Aion as she grew into her role. The end of her days as it was in Chrono’s dream recording.

“I did. I've seen the start and end to your journey and I don't think I need too much more info to tell what happened in between those two periods of time.”

“Excellent. Now, I shall do the same for you. Why do you, an ordinary human, have control over Time?” AO asks.

“It's really rare I suppose. I’ve never thought about it.” I respond with a plain guess to AO's

question.

“It's not just rare, it's impossible. Humans do not control time they are controlled by time. You things are enthralled by it, slaves to it. Every second that passes is a second you lose.”

“I'm different, I have to be. Right, Aion?” I glance over at her. She doesn't have any particular face on anymore. She's simply staring at AO in silence.

“Cassandra, how can you not see it? Your desire for her affirmation isn’t just proof you're different!”

“Proof? What do you mean?”

“Do you think you are the only person in the history of time that Aion has had under her thumb? Have you not once ever thought that someone has been there before you? Have you not seen it yourself in their dream machine?” The thoughts finally cross my mind. AO is right. I have seen someone else in my position. I'm an idiot. What am I doing right now? An alternative version of me is telling me that Aion has been lying to and using me.

“Isn't that interesting? C'mon it's gotta be! Your relationships with Aion and Chrono are so natural aren't they? Like you've been around them your whole life? You seek Aion out no matter what. On top of that, there wasn't much for introductions when you met Chrono huh? Like you sort of knew who he was in the back of your head already. Right? Tell me I'm right. C'mon I'm so right!” They're right. Even if Aion mistreats me and takes me for granted, I'm always looking forward to the next time we're together. Always waiting for her at the door with my tail wagging… As for Chrono, I always felt he was related to Aion and that sort of, put me at ease.

“Everything about you is compatible with your superiors. When Aion tells you to do something you do it. When Chrono tells you to do something, you do it. Have you never thought about that? Have you ever thought about who you actually are? Why you were the subject they used to train the AI?” AO raises their hands and shrugs. “What use would a girl with five or so years of experience

be of? How would a computer that runs to the end of time only require five years of data? That's preposterous! Isn't that right Aion?" Aion turns her head away. Why is she shying away from AO. What are they getting at?

It makes sense. My enemy makes complete sense. Why do Aion and Chrono need me? I have some cases under my belt but nothing to supply the amount of data the machine requires. Why was I really there? What really happened? The river!

"Ah, that face! You look like you've remembered something. But I'm not done yet, there is something I had forgotten, Cassandra. You are special in another way aren't you? You woke up in Nyarlathotep's dream. You killed them there. With perfect timing, as usual." Their words strike fear into me. I never told Aion about it what happened and the fallout from it. Chrono and Morrigan made no mention either. Nobody told her about the monster in my head. I have no rebuttal for this. If she found out then she would've hated me. Saw me as dirty, unclean. Aion…

I am left here to simply let my mind wander to every dark recess within me. These feelings will drown me if I keep trying to push them down. Listening to AO doesn't seem like such a bad idea.

"Your silence speaks for you because words can not. She doesn't know. But I bet the other one does." AO moves towards Aion with a smile on their face. I look back at Aion, the same expressionless stare. Why isn't she saying anything? What is right and what is wrong here? Why am I constantly left in the dark?

"I wonder, tell me what you think about this idea I just had Cassandra. It's never a lie because you never tell it. But it's never the truth because it never comes to light. It's stuck in a limbo between reality and illusion. You're the only person who knows it happened, much like a dream. If it's good, you share it but if it's bad, you keep silent." This is agonising. This feeling in my chest that knows everything is wrong. I'm wrong. Aion is wrong. Chrono is wrong. I'm being lied to. This sinking feeling in my stomach that makes me feel uncomfortable in my own body. I'm being manipulated.

I'm the only one who doesn't know. This thing from a parallel universe knows but I don't.

“Tell me what you know, AO. What are Aion and Chrono afraid of me discovering.” If she won't tell me, then I'll ask them. I'll decide what's real and what isn't.

“Think Cassandra, think. Why did Nyarlathotep try abducting your body. Let's start from the top.” AO points to their head.

“Nyarlathotep wanted my body to learn the secret to time travel.” I answer.

“Good. Now to do that, they required as little interference as possible so they did something extra to you. You couldn't resist if you didn’t know who you were. Where did they take you to wipe your slate clean?”

“The River Lethe, in the underworld. I supposedly forgot everything about myself.”

“Yes! Now how is it your memories could be used for the AI if they were swept away by the river? Solve this mystery detective.” How were my memories used for the AI if I lost them? These two pieces of information can't coexist. And the dream I woke up in, how did I wake up in a dream that wasn't mine? What if they weren't my memories? What if they've never been my memories? I feel my feet wobble underneath me. I feel hyper conscious of every thought in my head. I feel like I’m going to fall down. Every movement I'm making. She's watching. He's watching. They've both been watching me like an bird in a cage. In a lab under a microscope.

“The look of horror on your face tells me everything Cassandra. You don't have to bear it alone anymore. I know exactly what it's like. You know, honestly, you've had it worse than I. I, at least had a choice. You, you've never had a choice. Not once in your life. Chrono and Aion have you down to a string of code in a lab on a computer they never even use. Your memories don't encode in your brain, they get backed up to a storage drive in a lab. When you need to know something the AI pulls it up for you and downloads it.” Silence follows their final words. I have nothing. There is nothing I can say or do or even think that is my own. Aion is still silent. She doesn't bring up a single word in

defence for me nor to object.

“Right before you were stolen by Nyaralathotep, you were fighting each other. You.” AO points at me. “You were fighting a God.” AO points at Aion. “How is that possible? How were you even remotely on the same field as Aion? How did you not get slaughtered by her? How did Aion destroy everything to exist, every timeline, every universe but yours? How did Aion fail at the very end? Tell me Cass, who did you see in my memories? Who was standing there with the Archon and Chrono in the office on the day I completed my Ministry exam?” I can hear Aion exhale loudly as AO finishes speaking. Does she not want me to answer? To find out what's going on here? Why?

“It was the Archon, Chrono, Kairos and Morrigan. The first three were there to congratulate you and offer you admission into The Ministry. Morrigan was there because she joined you along the way.”

“Ding ding ding! Correct! And you even remembered Morrigan! That's extra credit!”

“Get to the point. Tell me what the fuck is going on. What the fuck am I? Why the fuck am I here? ”

“Ooo, spicy! Love it! Fuck it, let’s do it! Aion you wanna say anything before I drop the bomb?”

θ´

“Oh but you won't say anything, will you, Aion? Because you know that you’ll get away with everything and your sins will slide down your back with ease. But when it comes to Cassandra, I want to watch the most beloved person to you in the universe, suffer. A soul so precious yet you were unbothered by experimenting on her predecessors for centuries unknown until you created the perfect vessel. Nothing less than perfection for Aion as I'm sure we all know!”

“Wh-what’s that have to do with anything? Upset I beat you to the punch? Not very God like of you!” Aion uncharacteristically shouts out at them, but I don’t think AO cares. They’ve not even looking at Aion anymore, their eyes have been on me the entire time.

“Well, I don't think I need to spell it out much more for you Cass. There were three Time God's in that office. You recognise two of them. The third one is the only one you haven't met. Why is that?” AO says. I look down at my hand. My hand? At my hand? I’m…

“Although the other two don't call you by that name anymore, you know I speak the truth. Aion couldn't kill you. She tried. Waited until the very end of the very last moment. She let you run away and escape time and time again. That's not the mentality of a killer, that's someone trying to see if their experiment is a success or a failure.” They finish speaking.

“Aion?” I call out. “Is what AO is saying true?” She doesn't respond. The silence envelops us once more. I get it. This is the game. This is how AO beats us. AO exposes the truth. There's no need for trickery because there's none to be done. AO never made me fight. Never hurt me. They played games with me and told me riddles. They're making me doubt Aion because of everything she has done. Hell, Aion and Chrono want me to get rid of AO. That’s why we’re still here. But those two made a mistake. AO didn't care about anything those two did. That's the power of The

Watcher. This is the power of Truth. There's no beating a God in conventional means because Gods are anything but conventional. Although something Aion said puzzles me.

"AO, what did Aion mean when she said beating you to the punch?" I ask.

"Seeing as how she's gone into silent mode, I'll tell you everything. Beating me to the punch meant she created a vessel that could take on the identity of Kairos. She discovered how to localise the phenomena, insert memories into a machine and wait for the soul to return."

"What do you mean return? Who or what is Kairos?"

"Time for another lecture Cassandra but I don't mind. I've had to wait quite some time to get you here, what is another ten minutes? You see, Aion is no fool. She has no weakness. Or rather, she had no weakness, thanks to you. Say, don't you think it's strange? That all of us, humans, gods, creatures beyond life and death from the unknown, have all gathered here together at this exact moment?" They ask.

"I suppose it is curious. I don't believe Aion had expected that you were going to awaken with our arrival." I reply.

"Aion accounted for everything, except you. Why? Because you weren't supposed to live this long."

"I wasn't? And that makes me something she didn't consider?" I ask.

"Think about it Cassandra. Why is she so critical of you not touching anything?"

"The system would recognise me as an outsider and with that some bad things would happen."

"Take a moment for to think about what I am going to say Cass. There are millions, billions, trillions of stars out there in systems full of atoms, molecules and elements stretched out over 100,000 galaxies in a single supercluster that humans will name the Laniakea. This is larger than anything you or I can imagine that covers an unimaginable amount of space that is unable to be defined. And every single galaxy in this cluster motions inwards towards a centre of mass called the

Great Attractor. It spans 500 million light years and were it not for a convenient anchor to a gravitational focal point, it would be dispersed with the ever-continual expansion of the universe."

"That's… beyond me. I don't know anything that specialised."

"A moment please. Everything, everywhere, as long as it contains mass or energy, is pulled on, by everything else. This is gravity. Massless particles bend space and time. I'm sure you know a little about bending space and time. And all of these galaxies in their clusters expand and expand as the universe grows. Each one emitting light that will eventually reach Earth."

"Right."

"No different than the atoms that built you. If you zoom out you start seeing the molecules, the macromolecules, organelles, cells, tissue, organs, organ systems and then finally you, the organism. Entire clusters of universes already exists within you, no different than what I previously described."

"Right, but I don't follow."

"Far beyond any telescope are galactic atoms, molecules that form into their own organism. All of the experiences in the galaxy live within you, everyone, every living creature that somehow exists in this sliver of time thanks to just the right conditions. Therefore, space is no less than humanity itself. Humanity can be reduced into simple parts, which is why I, that is, The Watcher and the alternate Aion first created these mechanical bodies. Anyone can build the body up, the outcome is the same. From Golems to Puppets, the idea ends up the same. But us, we are better than that. A perfect image no matter the base form. What I failed to notice was that this in itself, is a flaw. *It was put back together by those who didn't know what it looked like to begin with*. Monsters can not build humans."

"What? You made the mechanical bodies because of space? Time? Humanity? I don't understand."

“You can break it down and build it up. Whether it is on the grandest scale of space or a single human. A doll is human-like but lacks a soul.”

“What does all this mean?”

“I was already dead by the time I left my universe. I only benefit from my soul surviving the event.” AO pauses, turning around and staring up at the obelisk. “However, putting a soul into a doll gives it life. We are the souls that sit in this doll. When Chrono took us to the End of Time, I was unable to keep my body from failing. The Watcher and I decided that our first priority was to create a new permanent vessel for us to use. We wanted to create life. We wanted to exist as our own form of nature. We did not want to be shackled to any other idea. We didn't need to achieve this for Chrono to be valid, we wanted to do it for ourselves.”

“The vessel… the mechanical body. But why did you need an AI? What was its function?”

“The AI will serve us with the destruction of your universe. At least when we get it back. It was stolen from us. Chrono betrayed us. He spent the entire end of a universe waiting for us to set up the next stage of his plan.”

“The next stage?”

“Everything that has happened was to bring you here Cassandra. Aion didn’t account for you but Chrono did. The Watcher and I coalesced to rebel against Chrono. All the while Chrono had fulfilled his duty. Completed his experiment. Hephaestus told you as much didn't he? To create the ultimate version of Kairos he first needed to secure the spirit of every God. And it seems they've all left now. Hephaestus remains as a lone God who has lost their purpose, who exists only to serve Chrono’s requests. At some point near the end, I thought if I could get my hands on you, we could go back, The Watcher and I. If Nyarlathotep could take you away and return us to before we lost our power, before we lost our universe, we could save it. You of all people understand just how much Aion ruined. How much destruction she had wrought. She did it all for you. She brought everything to

ruin, for you. Just to see if Project AI would be a success or not."

"We were going to reverse it! We came to Leng to reverse the events that led to the destruction of other timelines!"

"No Cassandra, it wouldn't have reversed them, just reset them. The Watcher and I would still be here in this timeline. Our lives would still be just as miserable. Our world would still be destroyed, our friends would still end up dying. If you had just been a good girl and let Nyaralathotep kill you, we could have at least gone back and rode out into the end together… " AO finishes speaking and we stand in silence. I can't believe so much, so, so much, went into me. All of this orchestrated for what? Me?

"The machines didn't mark you as a stranger, far from it. They recognised the return of Kairos and with it, the True Master of Leng. If the light switch was in the off position, pressing it down again wouldn't do anything after all. An order from *you* would be seen as opposite of Aion or Chrono." An order from me is opposite of Aion and Chrono?

"Perhaps throughout your life you've noticed how you always get something just in the nick of time? That's no coincidence Cassandra, that's your ability. Kairos is a Time God similar to Aion and Chrono but Kairos only exists short periods of time. Well, short compared to the other two. Kairos is the God of Opportune Time. But Aion and Chrono have constantly picked at your origin. You time travel for instance. Such a feat is beyond Kairos. You should only exist in the moment, now and forever."

"Kairos… I… am aware that things tend to always work out for me. From stopping objects that fall to getting away from Aion. Holy shit, that's what Cordelia meant! That's why she hesitated! They knew! They all knew! Everybody knew! Even you know! Why do you know?" I reply. Shock and surprise run through my mind.

"We all worked together on the mechanical bodies. I had worked tirelessly to find the right

expert, to put the project together, to test it myself. But alas, in the end I could not leave this body and possess one for Kairos. My destiny is tied with this alternate Aion. The Kairos vessel has restrictions we couldn't find a way around. I assume Nyarlathotep ran into the same issue. A thousand years and they couldn't take your body, no not just that, they lost to you! The power of Kairos protects you."

"The power of Kairos… Then that means… Who's memories do I have?"

"Well, I figure that's kind of obvious Cass. The AI is full of memories from every Kairos, including your own. And not just memories. Ideas, values, cultural knowledge of both human civilisations and Gods, and of course, the history of both. That's why Nyarlathotep couldn't make you forget everything. You had a backup on a server in their lab at the End of Time. Perhaps the spirit itself doesn't know but you have found yourself with memories because you are fed them." AO sombrely looks away, staring into the fake horizon of the graveyard. I stare off in the same direction, looking at the names that cover the graves. Kairos. They might as well say Cassandra…

"I pity you more than anything. Kairos was a wonderful mentor to me and an invaluable friend. But now you Cassandra, are the first digitised God, made with Aion and Chrono's best interests in mind. You're a project to them. A successful end to their experiment. Unaware of your own existence, constantly journeying, saving others but unable to save yourself, seeking out love but to never have it returned." AO goes silent. This is a lot to take in. I'm this and that and this and that and it's so overwhelming I feel like I'm going to faint. I can't breathe. I can't think. Aion isn't saying anything. That must be an admission of guilt. She isn't saying anything because she can't refute truth. She isn't saying anything because she doesn't care. If she doesn't care then should I care? Is that even my own idea? Are these even my own thoughts? Am I thinking that or did a version of Kairos think that. Is that what the query responds to? Is this what the database decided the best dialogue options were?

AO raises their hand upwards and throws it outward. A halo grows around them, twelve disturbing eyes open up above AO's head. Pained glances containing yellow irises encapsulating blood red rings stare at us. A challenge between all parties is declared. Aion summons her blades, settling into each hand. Her stance shows she's ready for a fight.

“Of course Aion wouldn’t regret shoving anybody away, she’s shown as much before. But you Cassandra, where is your breaking point? Although you were always by Aion's side yet you rallied against her plan. You find life precious. The experiences of living creatures discovering worthwhile pursuits was something worth saving. Hell, Aion was someone worth saving to you.” Aion? That's right. Aion is someone I wanted to save just as much as everyone else. And if I wanted to save Aion…

“The dreams of beings yet born to find and understand their place in the universe. To seek out relationships with one another, to ever search for love and hope amidst the constant barrage of hatred and despair that life imposes upon life. Always two points of view stuck fighting each other as time marches forward. Now I will force this upon you. Do you pick Aion’s side and save yourself over them, or do you stick to your own decision, letting them survive in exchange for you? I can’t wait to watch you pick. What will you choose?!” AO floats into the air, leaving me with the reality of my choices in front of me. AO then appears in front of Aion, I can hear disgust leave her mouth.

“You failed Aion. I live because of her. How does that make you feel?” Staring intensely at her, AO makes Aion flinch away.

“I…” Aion quietly replies. I feel like I need to do something. Is that me talking? Or is it Kairos? Our link? Is my bond with Aion my choice? Man, thinking about all this nonsense! I want to be together with Aion like we used to be. I want to solve cases. I want to help people. I don't know if that's me or Kairos or whoever but it's all I know. It's all I've done. I chose her. I'll find out her reasons after all this but I know that at the End of Time, she wanted help and I wanted to help her. I

didn't need a reason to help her. I didn't need something on a computer in some lab to tell me that. I thought that back then and I still think that now because I love her and she loves me.

“I don't know if, back then on that final day, it was the first time Aion and I fought or if that was the last time and I don't care. If I'm stuck in a never ending loop of failure and disappointment and death and despair then so be it. I'd go through with it a million more times to stay by her side. What you said is right, if she wanted me dead she would've killed me. But Aion keeps me around for the same reason I want to be around her. This… whatever this is, won’t stop her. It won’t stop me either. You can't stop us!” I shout at AO with my heart back in the right place. I hope my words carry that hope I usually bring around for Aion.

“What exactly do you represent? What do you labour for? Humanity? Gyahahaha! No one! Nobody! You’re Goddess on a leash used for her convenience. You’re nothing. A make believe detective. I’ve seen the data. The work you did up until that final day. Where does the hero go when the story ends Cassandra? What do you still want?” I look down at my hands and stare. Yeah, I guess it is over. What do I do now that I've done what I was sent here for? I look over at Aion and she turns her head away. Does she think the same thing? She brought me here, Chrono trained me to be here. But I don't think it was with bad intentions. She wanted to be with me. I wanted to be with her. I ball my right hand into a fist and slap it down into my left hand. Even if she's not on my side, I'm not going to let another cosmic weirdo ruin things for me.

“Sure, my story might have ended the day I fought Aion. Sure, I might be a monster built in a lab but I’m still Cassandra Watson! And that’s enough. Aion, let me handle AO. It’ll be easier for the both of us. Trust me.” Aion turns her head toward me, staring with concern and consideration. Her days of cold callous looks are a distant memory. That's all the proof I need to know Aion doesn't think of me like that.

“Well would you look at that. She’s worried about you! Look at Aion, Cass! She thinks she has a

heart. A soul. How touching. You changed her detective." AO further antagonises Aion, to no avail, however. Aion turns and walks towards me, her confident stride and arrogant nature returned to her. As if she knew something that AO didn't. It seemingly left her without fear. Maybe it even encouraged her. Aion might finally feel the hope that I had vaunted about all those moons ago.

"Ignore the taunting. You're past this, right?"

"Yeah I am. And I think it's time for a bath honestly!" Aion says to me, rubbing the back of her head and having a bit of a giggle.

"You aren't worthy Cassandra. You'll never be worthy. When she doesn't need you anymore she'll toss you to aside and build another body for the next time Kairos shows up. You're trying to influence a creature on a different dimension. No matter how hard you try a 3D creature can't interact with a 4D creature." AO shouts at me.

"Worthy? I'm apparently worthy enough to keep you talking bub!" I shout back.

"I'll teach you your place Cassandra. Don't act so high and mighty, you're still as insignificant as any human is. " AO spoke oddly but it does help create the villain I first expected to encounter.

"Well I guess that's what's special about us. Always daring to push, never complacent. We're brilliant enough to create and terrible enough to destroy. We are full of passion! Full of love! But you only seek to cause chaos, to sow discord and to destroy. You don't understand. Time has blinded you. You are fuelled by hate. That's why Aion trusts me with this battle." I catch myself off guard with a confident tone full of surprising material. These words were wise beyond my years but they are true. They were my position before and they remain my position now.

"Trust it to you? Gyahaha, that's rich. You think I am full of hate? You want to challenge me? The pinnacle of existence? What are you, trying to impress your lover… Former lover… What even are you two?" AO's hesitation would be the first and only mistake Cassandra would allow them.

"What are we indeed? I am undeniably a part of her and she of I. But after one thousand years do

you think I'd keep idle and let Aion handle everything? This is my choice! I will not forsake those you turned your back on for revenge! I will follow in the steps of those before me to keep the hopes of those lost alive!"

"What gave a low priority being like you the right to decide who lives and who dies? You are nothing, a second rate Kairos! Data on a server of someone Aion can't let go of!" AO shouts with enough ferocity to shatter the soul. Sounds not meant to be heard echo through the world. I stay my tongue. I won't answer the call to provocation.

"You. Are. Nothing. From your mightiest palaces to your filthiest prisons, the same animal occupies them all! Mortals and their delusions! This is the Gap between the *Divine* and the *Irreverent*, Cassandra!" The stern voice echoes out once more, powered by dismissiveness and arrogance. Cass looks at her reflection and closes her eyes. A line down the middle, where a former foe had taken possession of her person. A unique visualisation of the split she had been forced to live with at the end of her travels.

"You're right. I'm nothing but a human. A second rate loser. I guess that makes you a second rate Aion! That makes me good enough to take you on!" Cass breaks her silence. Her voice matches the echo. It travels beyond the echo of her enemy. A shout for humanity. Calm your thoughts and desires. Dissolve your ego. Balance gives and takes.

Birth of a God/ι΄

“Forbidden Art: Quod Erat Faciendum!” With the shout, power from beyond her years, the experience of time immemorial, the smile from the pride of every victory, the bitten tongue to hold back weeping from the sorrow of every defeat, the culmination of progress and achievements of every Kairos. The power of her hope comes to fruition. The potency of her truth finally revealed, her body rips and tears and repairs itself up over and over again, a constant state of destruction and creation. As it ever was and will ever be. The greatest ability and, greatest downfall of humans. Their greatest paradox.

Boiling, bloodied, dirty, cut and beaten yet her skin still smooth, she stood resembling Cassandra and seemingly still sentient yet, sense no longer seemed very common. Before AO even formed the thought process necessary, before their subconscious could even send the signal to move, the God flies towards the woman standing in place. A sharp blade glints in her eyes as AO swings it into her head. A clean cut all the way through. Her head falls to the ground and AO stands triumphant.

“Now that I’m on the other side of this exchange, I have to say, I chose correctly.” Cassandra says. The world stands still, frozen in time.

AO turns around in shock, face to face with the most basic of human offensive actions. A punch. A punch that represented so much and yet would only make for a simple move in some cheap novel.

“Y-you!?” AO shouts in surprise.

Launched by the force as no more than a toy, AO is slammed by a power they never considered. In that punch is one thing. The power to challenge God.

Horribly bewildered and satisfyingly bewitched, AO raises their body up from the crater in the ground they made after crashing into it from the power of the punch. Then the thought finally occurs

to them. Cassandra Watson has superseded authority. At best AO could humble themselves and be the ones to talk their way out of a fight. But what does it mean? Cassandra Watson is aware of her origin. She isn't from any holy isle nor a time period of magic or faerie. Yet, she's intrinsically linked to everything. Each Ministry member would give her full recommendations. Aion herself watches over the fledgling goddess, teaching and protecting her. If she's able to challenge God then Kairos is now the one in control.

That's right, in all her battles she had never once gone in with intent to fight. Nary a record of her casting even a single spell and yet here she was. Unlimited potential. Or perhaps she's under a form of auto-suggestion. The irony is not lost upon AO. Was it not the message they had created? Of course, it's her directive. Having authority meant the birth of Kairos.

Her previously damaged yet fair skin is gone. Grown up beyond her years. A calm and mature woman stands firm and the girl is hidden away. Only a blank slate lay where a face should be. The goofy smile that's usually found there is replaced by a calmness. Faintly, the outline of her eye only shows emptiness.

Blinking her eyes, an array of emotion shatter into Kairos' being, her soul. Millennia upon millennia of eons come and gone. Victories and defeats, love and loss, joy, and sorrow. These feelings crash into AO's very core, overwhelming their heart. Unbeknownst to them, time had resumed. Nothing seemed even out of the ordinary, the final feeling delivered unto them. Among all the truth AO had given Cassandra, she returned with only one thing. Failure. Cassandra imprints that all too familiar feeling onto her foe. And what remains within them is Emptiness. Perhaps in time AO would reflect upon the feeling that a simple woman had delivered unto them. It would have to happen in the next cycle, however. Time is not on their side. Gritting their teeth and clenching their fists, they too finally found themselves falling under humanity.

"The time for words has ended it. Better to burn out in one final struggle than to fade away

right?!" AO shouts at their opponent. Not out of anger or hate. It's joyful. AO relishes in the fact that they finally get to meet the final traveler on their journey.

"Finally! Gyahahah! Finally, I get to see you again! Tell me, why have you shown up before me now? Kairos!" AO shoots their hands upward and laughs. They're happy. Having fun. If anything, it's infectious. I have to return the energy as equal.

"Why? Because that's my resolve. To explore and discover. To hate and to love. To frown and to smile. If fate decrees that I fall, then I'll fall. But you better believe that if fall into the depths I'll be flying straight back up. Because that's who I am. Because that's what it means to be CASSANDRA WATSON!" Introspective and vigorous, a smirk quickly forms over her face as she charges at the trembling God. Divine blades appear in Cassandra's hands, reminiscent of her Master's. Elegantly, purposefully, and perfectly, an onslaught of slashes run into and around AO. Time moves at her pace, under her control. Each slice is faster than the previous. Unable to keep up with the newly awakened Cassandra Watson, AO struggles to fend off the strikes. Whatever powers their body is still told to protect it, even at the high cost of damage.

The blades relentlessly cut and dig in, spreading hurt and pain throughout her foe. AO is certainly sturdier than any opponent she had faced before. Blades of divine forgery, however, prove to be quite effective against other Gods. Each point of contact hit harder than the last and the peace still sits on Cassandra's face.

AO finally reacts to the attacks with flames of putrid colour coming down to shield their body. Two of the eyes sitting within the corrupted halo above their head begin to brightly shine in a sickly colour. The heat catches Cassandra off guard and it forces her back. Her coat catches fire and begins to burn. She quickly rips it off of her body. Her left arm doesn't escape in time and is burned by her foe's defensive manoeuvre.

"Don't let it get to your head Cassandra. *Stolen Art: Corrupted Aegis of the Goddess of Wisdom!*"

AO cries out, staring at their opponent.

Grotesquely, Cassandra slaps the burn on her arm and wipes it down as if it were a spilled drink. The wound vanishes, much to AO's chagrin. It appears attacks of normal convention won't have any effect but simultaneously gives them new ideas. If attacks can still harm her then she can still feel pain. The cosmic monster would only need to out last her opponent. The terms of victory were to hurt Kairos until she couldn't turn the clock back on any wounds.

Cassandra is thinking quite less at the moment. As her wounds heal, she throws the left sword at AO and recalls it through time while charging at her foe with her right blade. One of these will have to connect. AO doesn't possess speed greater than hers and the righteous flames that burnt her won't burn the weapons. AO catches onto the trick however, another one of the eyes lights up.

“There is nothing I can’t see, Kairos! *Stolen Art: Iniquity of the King of the Sea!*” Cassandra is slowed down, her feet sink into a pool of water. This gives enough time to AO to dodge both blades by flying upward into the bright sky.

A fourth eye shines, clouds gather in the sky above. The spark of energy in the atmosphere tells Cassandra what's about to happen but there is no way for her to react in time. A bolt from the heaven's crashes down to smite the unfaithful. A burn from a flame she could deal with but a strike from the most powerful of Gods? She is hit and takes the brunt of the damage. Sitting in the pool of water with metal objects work against her. To escape this attack she needs to think.

“Have another! There are plenty more to strike down a philistine like you! *Stolen Art: Unrighteous Strikes of the Lord of Lightning!*” With the words travels another bolt. Rolling time back on her body, she quickly places the blades on top of one another and tries to block the strike. They can handle as much, but won’t get her out of her situation. Cassandra realises that if she wants to win, she can't fight fair. This isn't a lovers quarrel, it’s to decide who receives the privilege of survival. For a moment she thinks to herself, it was fortunate that Nyarlathotep was the one that got

to her first. Although no other Kairos had experience with this, she was able to learn this because of her unique connection.

"T*aboo Art: Full House!*" She shouts and with it, eight blades come flying out of the air and towards AO. Although slow on the draw back from their electric offence, three more of the dim eyes begin shining.

"*Stolen Art: Blessed in Life and Death!"* A golden shield, a spear and shining armour materialise over AO's body. This prompts the earlier flames slowly rescind and the eye that activated the ability shuts.

Surrounding the armoured foe, three variations of Cassandra fight in place of the real one, while the fourth makes her way to Cass' side for assistance. Each copy contains all the ferocity of the original. They attack in tandem with one another. One charges forward to gain their enemies attention, prompting the shield to go up. A second follows up by attacking the spear side, prompting another block from their attack. The third flies in from behind, her blades prepare to stab her foe.

"Gya hah hah hah! Now we're talking!" Maniacal laughter exits AO as the coordinated attack by Cassandra is a success. The third copy gets a clean stab through the armour with her blade but AO seems unaffected by the pain. Another bolt of lightning comes crashing down from the heavens and strikes AO themselves. The Cassandra with her blade still lodged in AO's body finds herself conducting the electric current. The other copies quickly rush away. AO's head raises up high, perhaps they enjoy the feeling of pain in the heat of battle. AO flips around after the shock and digs their spear into the immobilised copy. The pole goes all the way through and they smile triumphantly for getting rid of one of the copies so quickly.

Catching AO off guard however, the copy explodes into a bright burst of magic. It destroys parts of the armour covering their torso and arms. AO smiles and stares down at the real Cassandra. The copy manages to pull her out of the pool of water, enabling her to catch her breath. She also reverses

time on the electrifying wounds. Cassandra meets AO's glance with her own and returns the smile. It appears that more fun is yet to be had. Another eye shuts, the armour entirely vanishes. Seven of the twelve eyes are open and three are shut. If Cassandra didn't want to be on the receiving end of any more hidden abilities, she needs to finish this fight sooner rather than later. She snaps her fingers and the three remaining Cassandra's go back in for a similar attack but now she will cut through any gaps in time.

This left AO without a moment to react and six blades find themselves very intimate with AO's body. Each blade returns in each Cassandra's palms, ripping out of the body, weeping with the blood of a God.

"GOOD! GOOD WORK!" An insane shout from AO. They take the offence, immediately charging at a Cassandra in front of them. AO takes care to appear as if they are charging for an attack but instead laying a trap, it brings them into their comfort zone. The move is careless and obviously telegraphed, Cassandra would predictably dodge and retaliate but AO is thinking a step ahead. They plan to attack the spot where a retaliation attack will be and this will catch all of the Cassandras off guard.

"Time works for the both of us however! *Divine Spirit: Millisecond Perfection!*" AO shouts once more. Just as they thought, one copy predictably moves right into the actual attack. AO cuts through time to fling the shield off of their left arm and it flies fast enough to catch a Cass off guard. Her head is lolloped off by the force and her body explodes, this time from a safe distance away. Another eye shuts with the loss of the shield but AO doesn't appeared concerned. Both remaining Cassandra's travel down to the ground, hoping their opponent joins them. AO obliges and floats down to meet them.

"Let's see you keep up then." Cassandra charges at her opponent and her copy follows. AO snaps their spear in half down at the middle with their knee and accepts the challenge. Well beyond the

speed of light, blades swing back and forth, trying to catch their foes slipping up. AO triggers activation of the eighth eye on their halo. It was not speed or time, it was sheer brutality that triggered. AO kept up with every slash and stab, dancing accordingly with their two partners. A single soul with the power and savageness of an entire war machine. Although AO was wounded, their movement suggests much else. They are laughing in the heat of the battle. The sweat and blood that drips down their body is determination.

"*Stolen Art: Proliferate War Machine!*" The other four eyes begin to glow and with it, AO's ruthless movements grow in strength. Power is being poured into the new ability. The blood that drips down morphs into a bloody mist before it reaches the ground. AO's actions are going beyond the means of Gods. There is no longer time in between motions. Cassandra is now at a disadvantage. There is no time to skip backwards or forwards to, there is only the moment.

"Is that it, Cassandra? Is that all the passion you hold within your soul? Is this as bright as your flame will burn?!" AO's movements shift, a barrage of swings by both of their hands crash into the remaining copy. The real Cassandra reacts by shifting to get behind but it's not enough to stop the killer instinct possessing AO. Pressing their broken spear into the blades of the copy, AO adjusts their footing and fiercely kicks into the direction they anticipate Cassandra to end up in. Their guess is rewarded, AO's battle sense proving the victor in yet another situation. Cassandra flies off into the other direction, a sight reminiscent of the beginning to their fight.

It does however lighten up the grip on their weapon and the copy Cass uses the opportunity to employ a different strategy. If AO is fighting at peak capability with raw power, it will only be countered by trickery. This is a simple task on the copy's end. A simple move to hurt a simple opponent. She pretends to be concerned about the original, dropping her guard and attempting to run to help her. Of course, AO picks up on this, tackling the woman down mid attempt and holding her in place.

“Boom!” She whispers into the others ear. At the end of the quiet exclamation the copy kills herself in a self destruct. The direct hit of the explosion does hefty damage to her opponent. The halo of eyes dim. Every eye shuts, attempting to direct all remaining energy into preserving the users life over everything else. It infuriates AO. How could Kairos fight in such a foul way? The gap between Cassandra and Nyarlathotep must have shrunk considerably.

The two pick themselves up off the ground. One hit by a kick loaded with the power that God's use to establish their dominance in the cosmos. It blew her away and was certainly painful but it’s not enough to stop her. The other one was blown up by a crude trick that was loaded with power from the darkest gaps in the cosmos. Both secret techniques end but one of the fighters is staggeringly more damaged than the other. AO coughs, blood spills out of their mouth as the battle returns to it's original terms.

What cruel joke set up by the forces beyond mortals lent her their aid? Kairos is doing another job for Aion. The universe conspires against anyone who crosses Kairos’ path. How unfair! These thoughts and more sit in AO’s head as they reach out their own hand to attempt an attack. Fruitless, however as Kairos' domain is time. She will reverse any damage she takes. She can keep on going for eternity. Her passion will burn just as bright at the end. She speeds herself up, running towards AO.

Her hands grip both blades for another power attack. Another obvious move from Cassandra but AO welcomes it this time.

“Fool!” AO goes for another kick, it connects with Cassandra and her body crashes into the ground again. Underneath the cloud of dust, a sword flies forward. AO dodges in the nick of time but it allows Cassandra to quickly sneak away. Her hidden movement allows her to get in a surprise attack from the direction her blade is flew off in. She catches the blade in the air and quickly she appears in front of AO. She sweeps them off of the ground using the hilt of her second blade. AO

sticks their arm out to try and minimise the damage the blade is going to incur but Cassandra opts to throw her arms upward. She lets go and her weapons fly skyward. They travel from left to right in a circle, like a full moon, anything and everything in the area makes the cut. A deadly move of a thousand slices comes crashing down and AO loses the arm that reaches out in defiance. It flies away into far off ground.

At that moment it made sense. She had lost her arm this way before, long ago. AO had already thought as much when they gazed at Cass' face. It's a void. Empty. To be fed auto-suggestions from a power that nobody can conceptualise.

"NO! There's still a chance! It won't end here! It can't end here! Everyones Pain! My Pain! I won't give up! I won't burn out! I still have two Gods left! *Usurper's Spirit: End of The World!"* AO shouts, pointing at their face. Tears overflowing and pouring down from the fountains in her eyes.

"I'll carry that burden! I'll carry your pain!" Cassandra shouts. Desperate and backed into a corner, they attempt another attack. Calling upon both of their divinities, they begin to herald the end. The entire facility of Leng roars at the call of its false master and begins destroying itself. The ground shatters and the obelisk begins to crumble. Crashing sounds bounce around as AO attempts to flee, vanishing in the chaos. Cassandra's focus turns to Aion. Her mentor had taken the back seat the entire time, silently watching. Aion dismissively waves her hand as if saying go after them. There was nothing to worry about. Aion approves of Cassandra's approach.

Cassandra knows the truth. AO is simply buying time. There is no God here, not anymore. Only a fake. The very filth of their soul stains the air they traveled past. The Watcher is unable to hold it together. AO's divinity is false. In fact, there was no divinity at all, only permission. From whom doesn't matter right now. The only thing on Cass' mind is settling everything, here and now. The stone they had sought was already gained. Together, she could carry Aion and repent for all of their sins.

Down the field of dilapidated graves, AO flees. They fly down below the shattered ground into the skies outside of the facility. Far below the clouds now, a giant blue orb stares up at the world. As if it blinks, Cassandra appears right next to AO. Running away or flying away, it's no difference. She extends her blades to pierce AO's chest. A clear incision goes through. Anguished cries of pain escape their mouth. Cassandra presses her swords deeper into her foe to make sure her job is done. Both fall into the clouds together, linked by Fate.

Together they crash far below on a unaffected part of Leng. The bridge they first encountered each other at now sports two crater shaped wounds. Dust flies up into the air and coats the two. Cassandra's body recoils off of the ground and she flies off, away from her opponent. AO is firmly stuck into the ground, nailed by Cassandra's swords. The blades in AO's body quickly fade away with Cassandra's fading consciousness. The dust settles from the impact, leaving them both exposed. Aion makes her way towards the crash site.

"My Master watches me as your master watches you… My failure is your reward. You have found the truth yet deny me. What of those whose pleas went unanswered? What of those whose happiness robbed? Lives cut short and surrendered… How unfair…" The vessel AO is using finally runs out of steam. It grows more and more limp. The spirit of The Watcher fades first and with it, the shaking of the facility stops. Leng, The Forgotten City in the Sky, returns to peace. Footsteps now the echo across the air. Slowly, the sound of heels approach.

"Your final lesson. Don't underestimate that girl." Ever pompous and proud, Aion's voice travels to AO as they lay defeated. Silent for a few moments, AO held their own vision of the end. Staring up into the sky, The Great Blue Eye stares down at them, in judgement of their failure. There will not be a third chance for them. AO, no, the alternate universe's Aion, then shifts her sights to Cassandra who also has seemingly stopped moving.

"There she is. That's the girl who arrived with you today… What a journey it must have been…

Congratulations Kairos, you've passed. You're a real member now. A real God. Enjoy your new found freedom. I find myself envious at the thought.”

"So, there is someone else behind the scenes. It’s her, isn’t it?” Aion's eyes return to AO.

"Indeed. I am but a puppet for my Master. She stares at us, carefully watching my failure and Kairos’ success… I cannot help but wonder how things would be different if we had met in a different timeline. Oh well, not that I will ever get the chance to find out. Regardless, the seeds of doubt have been planted. My Master’s true goal has been achieved.” Solemn to a T, she lays helpless. Her gaze fixated on the girl who broke through fate itself.

"What are you saying? That's Kairos. You already knew her.” Aion's expression wasn't sorrowful but it certainly wasn't the face of a victor either. She knew well what it meant for AO to still pledge some form of loyalty to *their* Master.

"This one, no, I did not know. Hidden from the universe as a human. A needle in a stack of needles. Impressive Aion. But I digress, I am as I said. A puppet for my masters. No one. Nothing. A phantom in the body of the dead. The shut down command I had given the facility was superseded. I have been removed from the system." AO coughs and hacks as their final breath approach.

“Kairos…” AO continues to stare at Cassandra. A girl both familiar and foreign but most importantly, her friend. “She just doesn't give up does she? I'm glad to see that despite the changing times, She's still herself. She still believes in life.” AO says.

"I'm sorry… that it had to be this way." Aion's words painfully fall down on their intended recipient.

"Aut Imiteris Aut Oderis. A result of our parallax, how we observed the world differently. And you still had an eye on me the entire time. Are you watching Kairos?! I'm not alone! I’m here with you at the end! Thank you!” Silence settles in for a moment, preparing to make itself comfortable in a new host of the departed.

“Aion, if I may, indulge me with one piece of information." AO's voice calls out.

“What is it?” Aion replies, respecting the final wish of her opponent.

“Morrigan, how is she? Did she move on like she wanted to?” The voice whispers.

“Yeah. Her sister took her place. She's something of a mentor now for Cass.”

“That's good… I can catch up with her now… That’s… good…” AO trails off. Her voice faint, the trace of life vanishing from her words.

Aion looks up into the sky. The facility of Leng stopped destroying itself but damaged structures and buildings continue crashing down. Far beyond the wreckage, the blue sky still stares down at everyone. Hidden far away yet disturbingly close, she watched the battle to its conclusion. It unnerves Aion and fills her with discomfort knowing that they were all being watched the whole time. She takes a deep breath and crouches down to her alternative self. The oppressive blue gaze only watches, she reminds herself. For now, it’s time to move forward.

“Goodbye, AO. No, goodbye Aion." The alternate Aion's chest rises slower and slower, the colour from her face fades. It’s over. Her adventure is finally ends. The last glimmer of light in her eyes reflect the face of a girl who had journeyed to the edge of time, the edge of space, to the edge of reality. A smile finally creeps across her face. A quip to match the energy of her friend, the final line to deliver.

"Heh...

What's so good about it?"

Done and Dusted

In a familiar seat at the end of time, for the first time in who knows how long, the lounge is exploding with noise. All of the Ministry girls are seated behind me at the couches. The cushions were cleaned of course. They're all catching up with Aion and Morrigan. The exploits they've done for the past thousand years while simultaneously making a fool of Aion as well as fools of each other. A thousand years is just a moment for them, it’s like they haven’t missed a beat.The seats to my right occupied by my friends, Althea and Daphne while being serviced by Chrono at the bar.

“So not once but twice you’ve saved us all from not one but two Aion's. It seems you truly are her Achilles Heel.” Althea says to me. I turn to face her and shrug.

“I'm just doing my job ma'am. No need to bring up how I've beaten her and/or variations of her.” I lean my left elbow on the counter and nod my head at her. I bet I look pretty cool.

“Yeah, don't inflate her ego Althea or this bozo is gonna let it get to her head!” Daphne chimes in. I point a finger at her and wave Chrono over with my other hand.

“Hey, how much did you give this goof to drink? You know she's not of age!” Chrono puts his hands up and laughs.

“Sorry but her and I go way back. I'm just giving the girl what she likes.” Chrono's remark gets Althea to cover her face with her hand. She's so totally laughing right now.

“All's well that ends well right?” Chrono says. He walks over to me and puts a drink down.

“I don't think I can drink this stuff either...” I nervously say to him while staring at it.

“It's actually a very sweet drink, like Daph's. There just isn't any whipped cream on top so it looks like everything else.” I nod and pick up the cup. Well if Daph likes it then it should be fine.

I indulge with a deep drink, letting the sweetness fill my mouth. What I was unaware of is how

different my tastebuds are compared to Daph's. The sweetness sticks to every part of my mouth, it's horrible! What is this cloying concoction and how can this girl drink something like this? She's had it before too! She's used to it!

“Goodness Daphne, how many of these things have you had? And you'd get whipped cream on top!” I stick my tongue out at her. I can smell the sweetness emanating off of my tongue. What an unholy liquid I just voluntarily poured down my throat. I can hear Chrono and Althea laughing.

“Sorry it's not made for your bad taste. Maybe you'd prefer a couple of red crayons and some glue ya bozo.”

“Who you calling a bozo ya bozo?” I reply.

“You’re a bozo ya bozo.” She replies.

“You’re the bozo here, Queen of Bozos.” I fire back.

“Oh yeah, then what’s that make you?” Daphne asks.

“A bozo!” I reply. Wait a second…

“You brat! Come here!” I leap out of my seat to get my hands on her but she leaps out just as fast and runs into the reception room.

“Oh you two, it’s like you never left Cass.” Althea smiles at me and lifts herself out of her chair.

“I'll calm her down and bring her back.” She says. I nod at Althea and sit back down at the bar. She wanders off into the other room, looking for the little gremlin.

“I'm surprised you could stomach it. I remember the first time she had a cup of that, immediately asked for seconds. It’s not quite the original she had but I think I’ve created a fine enough facsimile.” Chrono settles next to me, taking the drink away and setting it on the back counter.

“That drink needs a warning label. If I had known that's what she was drinking I would've stuck with soda.” We share a laugh, acknowledging that it’s time to discuss business.

“Looks like your Metis has come out on top again. Congratulations, Kairos.”

“Cassandra. Cassandra Watson is my name. And I don’t think my Metis is what won anything this time. More like a warp spasm.”

“Sorry. Ahem, Cass. You’ve done as I’ve requested of you. You’re now free to do as you wish. Although, when you return to the world below we're going to have to have you advance a few years. Do you remember?”

“Yeah, I remember.”

“I do have some work ready though if you’re interested. There’s a period of time I'd like you and Aion to visit. I've already set up living arrangements for you.”

“More work already? What, another God need beating?”

“Ahaha, no, not quite. Some murders just strange enough have caught my attention. They occur in Tokyo, Japan from 1989 to 1999. I'd like you to investigate them for me. Not that you have to accept mind you. I have a team and I’m sure Aion would eventually get it done.”

“You set up living arrangements separate from Aion?”

“Well, I can't make either of you fulfil my request nor do I want to make either of you commit to it. In the case that you do decide to check it out and Aion doesn't, you'll at least have your own place to rest at.” He makes sense. Neither of us have to work on his behalf anymore.

“Alright I'll do it. It's my job after all.”

“Thank you Cass. Let me get you a refill.” Chrono finishes speaking and turns around to get my drink.

“Hey, Chrono. If you could answer something for me, I'd appreciate it.”

“Ask away.”

“In the alternate Aion's universe, you and her had to return Eris' box. What was in that box? Why does no such box exist in our universe?”

“The box? At the centre of the crater?” He answers with questions of his own rather than

answers.

“Yeah.” I reply.

“Ahaha are you serious? You don't know what's inside? Surely you must know what that box was and who it really belonged to.”

“C'mon, tell me what you guys were looking for back then.” I press on.

“Well, that box contained the most dangerous thing in the universe.” He turns around with cup in hand and sets it down for me.

“The most dangerous thing in the universe?” I ask him.

“Hope.” He responds.

“Hope?”

“Now as for whether it was to preserve their hope or to keep it away from them, I do not know. That authority belongs to someone greater than I.” Something that even he doesn't know. I can hear Daphne in the hallway. Althea finally caught her.

“And the box in our universe?”

“In this universe? I’ll let you know if it ever shows up!” He replies. Althea and Daphne return. Guess our conversation finished right on time.

“Chrono my good man, another drink please.” Daphne leaps back into the seat and sets her empty cup on the counter.

“Aye aye, Captain.” Chrono turns around and gets to mixing another lethal sugar bomb. Althea takes the seat next to me, patting the top of Daphne's head.

“No more trouble. Today is a day of celebration remember?” Althea reprimands Daph's actions.

“Yeah that's right, get it together ya bumble brain.” I teasingly shout at her.

“Takes one to know one stinkhead!” She hurls an insult back.

“What'd you call me?!” I roar. Althea spins around and pats my head. I can’t keep up the insult

contest with Althea staring at me. Her large eyes pierce my soul and I feel myself shrinking away from within, returning to my formerly docile state.

“Order up!” Chrono slams down another drink on the table for Daphne, her attention now focused else where.

“I got it Althea. We'll be good girls.” I can hear her quietly laugh as she pulls her hand back and waves to Chrono. She orders a drink of her own and the atmosphere mostly returns to normal.

I’m not sure if what I did was the right thing or not. Although AO, The Watcher, The alternate Aion, they were wronged by those in charge. Cheated and robbed of their lives for an experiment. Something I can deeply sympathise with. In the end, one of us remains. One of us liberated.

Did it have to be this way? I’m sure it was only a matter of time before AO and I met. It only happened because Chrono pushed things forward. If we had met of our own accord, would we have gotten along? Would we have found common ground? Would we have become friends? If only we had just a bit more time…

I spin around on the stool to check on all the other girls. I'm half surprised Aion hasn't come to drag me over and get me to talk for her. I guess even she misses her friends. I look past the girls on the couch and into their reflection on the mirror. Something about it is slightly off. I don't see myself or the others around the bar, in fact, there are only three people sitting on the couch. I blink and rub my eyes, maybe my brain is still tired from the fighting. I look again but the reflection remains the same. No, I see now. It's her.

The white haired girl turns her head around and looks up. She makes eye contact with me. That's her. Her and the only two people that ever looked out for her, Morrigan and Kairos. I can feel the sadness swell up inside me but I can’t let something lame like that be the last thing I share with her! I let out a small laugh and smile. She waves her hand at me and turns away.

I turn around and wave my hand back at her.

Fin

“The Conspiracy of Leng”

Author: Pheme

Reviewed by Fama Perturbāre

Through our rich and varied past, our native home name invokes the same feelings of glory and honour as they have since the creation of Olympus. The fame of Zeus' Throne still captures the envy and pride of the ears of every Man and God in creation. Word spoken for The King of Gods are not words of reservedness that other comparable Holy deities are given. This alleged account from Pheme calls to attention the handling of the land Leng, the scene of a Cosmic Attack seven years ago. Leng is one of the few outer territories that remain in use within the Olympian circle of influence.

The official documentation submitted to Olympus reports that a rogue creation of the Gods Hephaestus and Chrono, took control of the greater facility Leng itself. The creature in question, a hybrid mix of a Cosmic Beast and a parallel version of the Goddess of Time, Aion. Together the being was referred to as Alpha and Omega (AO). The creature had only one demand, to complete its Artificial Intelligence as a means to extend its life. AO however was swiftly dealt with by the successful deployment of the Kairos Unit. Pheme states that she was a member of the Ministry team that first gathered to work on AO's experiment as a way of persuading public opinion with her ability to twist words and spread rumour.

According to Pheme however, the real experiment was a testing ground for the new version of

the Kairos Unit, completely unbeknownst to AO and only AO. A top secret creation that was on par to blasphemy against the supernatural order of Godhood. It was well known among the team what the true nature of their experiment was. They would discover if a God could be placed in a new vessel and controlled, no different from Man. When the truth was revealed however, the creature AO, was framed as the project's mastermind by Olympus' internal investigative team to save the reputation of the several Gods who green-lit the experiment.

Ultimately, the team was unsuccessful in creating this new artificial God and the project dissolved underneath several team members abandoning it. Word is that a couple of the members stole the data recorded for themselves. AO was ultimately tricked into eternal sleep by the Goddess Aion and the God Hypnos as punishment.

Eons later, a former team member would be the one to reopen and close the experiment. The final version of the Kairos Unit arrived and solved the case. She is more commonly referred to under her mortal name, Cassandra Watson. Her arrival on the scene is assisted by former members of the project. "The Goddess Aion", the former lead of the AI program, "The God Chrono", chief advisor to the AI program, "The Goddess Morrigan" a computer and data scientist expert, (rumoured to come from the same source as the parallel Aion) and the Goddess herself, Pheme.

Kairos converses and consults with Aion, who has brought her to Leng to finish off the failed experiment, AO. However, the foe turned friend, AO opts to play games with Kairos and gets to know the final version of the AI they sought to create. Most shockingly however, and the reason this review exists, is to take a look at a very special guest. Pheme's account records an invisible third party that accompanies Kairos. A Cosmic Beast called "Nyarlathotep." In a complete failure of duty and with lack of any care or consideration, this monster's rampage in Leng provides a link to the increased attacks by Cosmic Beasts. These attacks are an affront to the work, time and effort past Gods have put in to securing the planet they were sworn to watch over by Zeus. This also points out

the lack of discipline both Aion and Chrono display and even puts into question their allegiance to their work. Kairos allows this beast to coexist with her and saw no need to prevent any sort of damage to the facility. Kairos has also refused to take responsibility for her actions and this brings in attention to her mentors. Word may get out that these invaders were even welcomed and hidden by the three. As insiders, it may suggest that Olympus stands by the decisions of Aion and Chrono and possibly even suggested them in the first place.

It is no secret that Olympus lacks the coordination and agency to reject such claims as many Gods have moved on from their work. Aion, Chrono and other Gods that remain, have denounced the claims. However, one God has come forward with the truth and is not letting her voice be crushed under the oppressive weight of the Time God duo. Pheme's report of all activity is highly curious and is viciously denied by any Gods related to the affair at Leng. This includes the members of The Ministry of Intergalactic Affairs own Goddess of Nature, Ceres, Goddess of Discord, Eris, and Goddess of War, Morrigan.

Pheme notes that the events in Leng have caught the attention of a member of The Pantheon who is none too happy to hear about the destruction of their facility. Saturn, the owner of the moon Leng is on, has been seen running around Olympus as she raises issue with her fellow Time Gods for seemingly abdicating themselves from their duty. It is long known that Chrono has passed on his responsibilities to Aion instead of Saturn and created a rift between the three. Saturn has claimed that Aion was always a poor fit for the job and that she didn’t deserve Chrono’s recognition. The failure at Leng comes hot off of the heels of Aion’s plan to eradicate every timeline in existence, another incident that Kairos had prevented.

We do believe that reading through Pheme's report is an eye opener and perhaps may even garner the attention of the Olympians who have been long gone. “It may take years, centuries, a millennia, but I will get the facts out there and with Saturn’s help, we’ll let the Olympians know what

corruption has taken place in our beloved home." The words of Pheme herself.

-Excerpt from The Acta Diurna's noteworthy events.

"I've sent this out for circulation. Hermes was more than willing to take the job."

"Hermes? I thought he was only taking jobs from Chrono?"

"He accepted without question. Since things died down he's had plentiful free time. After Yhidra failed, Kairos has been on top of all incidents at a rate above Aion and Chrono."

"Kairos' peace has left a void. A void I'm going to fill."

"What's the plan?"

"It's time for the Gods to return. The Olympians must return home. The Pantheon must witness Aion and Chrono's failures."

"Nobody knows about you?"

"Up to the end, I performed flawlessly. Nobody knows a thing and if they did, it's too late for anything to be done about it."

"It's time to prepare."

"Prepare?"

"For *The Grand Festival*."

"Of course. I will continue my activities as contact between Kairos and the Throne."

"We're on the precipice. Cassiel. No more games. No more data. It's time for action."

"Of course. *Saturn*."

Part Six- Enigma Engine

It is an atrocious feeling that grips its hideous self on my pure heart. I feel so horrible and helpless, I can't believe it's real. I want to vomit; my chest hurts. I need something, anything, to help cleanse my soul.

Thus Said-1

I am undeniably Cassandra Watson and yet lingering within me is a feeling of my "self," fading away. I am me and yet we are not. Who I was. What I was. That person no longer exists but still I stare into the mirror and see her face, body, reflection. I hate staring at her. She stares back at me. I hate knowing she's there. I receive all of her attention when I'm here. I hate her. She's afraid of looking away because the second she does, I'll get closer to her.

There is this crawling feeling that creeps along my mind that springs to life every time I try to remember myself. The deathly sensation burns me when I try to turn back the clock. I am me and yet I am not. I am masquerading as what I think I would be. The girl everybody knew before I changed. Before my mind, my body, my spirit were nearly stolen from me. My memories are still there. I can see myself chatting with Daphne, cooking with Althea, visiting Aion. I know it was me. I was there. But the girl they know is fading. Melting away in a puddle and evaporating before my own eyes. It's about 2:00 am. I'm out on another late night walk with my mind full of thoughts. Some are mine… some aren't…

It's a peculiar. To watch myself change. To combine what I had known before and with what I

know now. I have gained wisdom over the course of my journey but what good is it if I can't share it. The secret that lies within me can't escape. If this universe weren't abandoned by its creators, I would surely be executed for willingly harbouring such a dangerous creature. This cosmic beast is the antithesis to creation. It seeks to harm, destroy, to cause chaos and spread confusion across the world. That creature wears my face and I hide it. Aion probably suspects my duplicity. I had so handily defeated AO in part of what *they* had taught me. Not to mention *I* was hardly with her in Leng. Now, more than ever, the border between us shrinks. I become her and she becomes I. All this amounts to is an empty feeling. A feeling that makes me feel like a stranger in my own head. If anything, romanticising this older version of me makes me feel like I have a crush on her. On myself.

Fortunately, I am still the host. I have never lost control of my body. She even returns function to me after asking to swap. If anything, we've become a team. Nigh unstoppable with our combined abilities. With all that I learned in Leng, my control over time is almost flawless now. Combine that with Nyarlathotep's forbidden magic and we're at the top of the mountain. But is it I who has climbed to the top? These walks help me process things that I think happened. Although if I'm being honest, I can't answer why I go on them.

Perhaps that is the core issue. I no longer have an existence to claim to. I am a mind in the shell of my body. I am Kairos. The God of Opportune Time. I know how to speak and behave around others but I have been doing it as Cassandra Watson. The fact that I've survived so many encounters up to this point is now because of all of our combined effort, not individual. Whereas in the past I would sit out more difficult work on Aion's orders, I've now saved her and every timeline that was destroyed. But I can't even face her now. Aion. The changes I've gone through. I can't hide them from her. From my head to my toes, there's no part of my body that hasn't changed. And each time I user *her* power for battle, the more my body reflects those changes. With each possession a brilliant

shroud of gold covers me, painting me in white and blue.

Thankfully, or perhaps fortunately, I have silence in my mind for the time being. *She* is resting. Things are peaceful for me, I can't complain. Defeating AO felt liberating despite them not being the one that put us in this position. A pawn for their mastermind, no different than I for mine. I've been thinking back to that diary I had read in my dream. The dream that I freed myself from and trapped her. We're all guilty here.

We share emotions. We're our own cheerleaders. Someone who has the power to change their choice. My unique ability allows me to use a redo button of sorts. I have the ability to make several difficult decisions in a short amount of time. Stopping Nyarlathotep, who I had nicknamed as Heart, disrupted the process. I awakened before the data gathering experiment completed. Yet that didn't stop the ones behind everything. AO had shattered my reality, forcing me to learn the true nature of the my lost thousand years. But we stopped AO. AO, who was my equal. Their personality was silly and goofy and stubborn all the way up to the end. Then she faded away with a smile on her face. Why would a monster smile at their own death? Why does that stand out so much to me?

Something possesses me to walk these late nights but, Kassandra usually isn't around for them. Why do I take these walks? What am I really looking for? I think the most bizarre part is that I've lost my senses. Not the traditional ones like to see or hear but instead, to worry, to fear, to anticipate. These things that in the past made me feel… alive. As it stands now, I'm practically invincible. Nyarlathotep is my messenger of death. If something goes wrong, I am the messenger of life. Together, we've removed the boundary of life and death. Our own Necrofantasia. I know I won't be defeated. Killing me is impossible now. With this knowledge however, I return to the feeling of emptiness. That I am a stranger in my own body. Maybe that is why I walk at night. I am not the one suggesting it but merely, the one acting upon it. I remember the feeling of suggestion in Leng too. Kassandra had woken me up twice in dreams of AO's past. Although I didn't have a good

explanation for Aion as to how I had woken myself up the first time. Kassandra couldn't answer Aion about her suddenly newfound knowledge. Another piece of the puzzle for Aion, assuming she hasn't already solved it.

I miss her. I miss her dearly. Above all, Aion is my friend. I feel as though I must hide away from her, hoping she'll forget me somehow. Not that she ever would but, I can't face her like this. I'm not the person she loves anymore. After defeating AO, my body continued to change. What if I just told her?

"Hey Aion, I actually have this really evil Cosmic Beast in my mind, and we solve crimes and stuff! Ok, see ya later!" She'd have to do something about me. I don't want her to make that decision, so I'll make it for her. I can always feel her flow at least. I'll always know when and where she is.

Plus, why worry when Chrono is fully aware? The three of us do function on a sort of hierarchy. Chrono is above Aion and Aion is above me. Does Chrono allow it because I'm Kairos? Or does he allow it because I have functional use outside of Kairos? There's a reason that he hasn't told her. I hope tomorrow I discover what I'm out walking so late for. Each time I leave, the more noisy my head gets. Why am I like this if I'm so empty and devoid of humanity? Is it process my thoughts and reason things out? Her reflection persists, yet so do I.

Beyond this Night/1

Junko Nazono is in a state of ecstasy and pleasure, pulling herself up off of the bed in the middle of the romantically lit penthouse suite. Other party goers can still be heard from the other side of the walls, jubilant that they had finally succeeded. She looks at the bed she pulled herself off of, hiding beneath the covers is the chief of police and a prominent politician. The low lighting blends the shadows of their body craftily into the darkness, hiding away the rest of the room.

She takes a deep breath and pulls her straight black hair behind her shoulders, trying her best to contain her excitement. Her success will be the greatest of anybody at tonights reception. Despite the bruises and bites covering her neck, chest, and thighs, she smiles. This is a very small price to pay for having everybody involved all in one place together. Junko had silently put up with the abuse for months now. But now, everyone is in her palms. Whispers float out of her person, entwining between everyone and everything in her vicinity. Not unlike chains, or perhaps string. Yes, the red string of fate. The two men on the bed didn't seem to notice she had gotten up, or perhaps they just didn't care. To them, they are winners, conquerors. They claimed her person and ravaged her body for hours. Suspicious substances still linger in their systems, they are coming down from their high and about to crash. She glances back at them and smirks. The picturesque moment elates in her heart. Their disgusting bodies neglected for years. Pasty skin marked distinctly by various liver spots, ingrown hair, poorly kept nails, hints of rosacea and unhealthily overweight. She just needs to pull on the string.

These high-rise buildings are indistinguishable from each other, they're more well-hidden than the restaurants and bars that litter the alleyways between one another. Hidden from view but always in plain sight. And the only people who to enter these upper floors are by invitation only. Fancy

bottles of wine and sake litter the floor. Sushi is set aside after they had enough of the Nyotaimori. Their faces hidden by the Kitsune. Razors and plentiful amounts of cocaine dirty the desk by the door. Rules for thee not for me. The gross mishandling of trust and judgement of these people makes Junko sick to her stomach. Not that it's the first time. No, this is going to be the last time. She sneaks out of the room and into the crowd.

The men in the room do not care. Their souls in elation at the festivities. Just like the men in the other room, their faces don't shy away from their intent obvious. Crowding around the girls they all try to get a touch in. Face, mouth, tit, stomach, pussy, ass. It controls their mind more than any substance. The foxes wail and whine underneath the tengu. The distress does not distract the predators. This makes it simple for Junko to float around the room, setting a hand upon each man. The red string wraps them all up.

They think this is the sort of things that foreigners bring into their country, but she knows the truth. This is a domestic problem. The corruption runs from top to bottom. Foreigners just take the brunt of the criticism because it's easy rallying everyone together on the inside against the outside. Usually, being in a dimly lit room in an area like this would be dangerous, especially with the heavy scent of alcohol in the air. And truthfully, it is extremely dangerous, or at least it is about to be.

"I've tied them all together." A whisper lifts the air around her and makes her smile. She turns around and returns to the side room she left. Junko extends her right arm out to the two men on the bed. She opens her palm wide and arches her head upright, licking her lips fervently. Her eyes lay intently on the victims laying before her. A smile cracks her face open. The hand closes shut and a wave of crimson paints the room. The strings had been masterfully woven around their hearts; her attack inexorable.

By this point, it's intrinsic to her. Akin to the rain that continues well into the night. The sound of it falling is extremely common in Tokyo. Water behaves as it is supposed to. She behaves as she is

supposed to. Her attention swaps to the room with the remaining guests. She only needs to see them to have command of their hearts. They're all interlinked now. She spins around to face the crowd, pulling the strings toward her. She spreads her arms open, her body on full display. Drunken cheers and shouts let her know that she holds everyones attention. She enacts the same pose as before, clutching her palm. The amorous cheering morphs into horrifying screams. Helpless yelps are matched by hysteric laughter.

That's how it is, eighteen bodies, zero hearts. The once bright illumination of the light bulbs now show a cruel, sickly, red hue over the room. It reflects reality, all the crimes they blissfully ignored while committing their own. Yakuza, police, politician, they are all hypocritical liars. The savageness of her actions doesn't faze her. She's the only witness. Nobody will be able to discover why everyone here died tonight. Deep red carvings in their chests looked more akin to a youkai killing them than a human. How could a single person feasibly do this to so many people? People in high positions of power at that? She knows she won't be caught. Anybody that sees her will succumb to her shadowed whispers of temptation. Namely, they will remove the listeners free will. They will become powerless before a ***God***. She will make you a pawn, a plaything to be tricked and eaten by the owner of the *Infinite Dream*.

Junko stares at the palm of her hand; she is perfectly still. If only she had started sooner she thought. She's surprised at how used to killing she has become. Shaking and trembling no longer steal control of her body. The only aftereffects of her ability put heavy strain on her body. Today, it's her left eye. Staring at so many targets pushed her to her limit. Junko freezes in place, placing both of her hands on her eye and winces in pain. Quickly, she walks over to her clothing and dresses up, as best she's able to. The cooled blood on her skin sticks to her outfit and makes it a little difficult to fit her kimono perfectly into place. There isn't enough time to fully cover herself so she takes her cloth belt and wraps it over the injured part of her face. Her view shifts towards the nightstand,

staring at the clock. The green glow had somehow evaded the red splash and illuminates the little table. The top reads ２８日１２月１９９９年. Below it is １：５９am. The debauchery had lasted all night, into the early hours of the next day. The trains have stopped for the night. There shouldn't be many people out this late on the remnants of Tuesday night. Most people are more than likely already sleeping. The few souls that are still out won't care. This works out perfectly. She can slick her way back home without issue.

After thinking for a moment, she decides on her extraordinary escape. She can't leave behind any evidence of being here. She is careful and cautious, this isn't her first time. She makes her way to the stairwell, climbing all the way up to the roof. Staring out at the drowsy city, she looks over the edges for a hidden side to drop into. She leaps from the top of the building, landing into the alley side of it. With her escape, there is only one thing on her mind. A dim streetlight reflects her image over the puddles of water. A whimsical smile builds across her face. The thoughts of the chaos her actions will bring excite her. There is no longer any doubt within her, she's a traitor to her kind. She stands up and looks down both ways in the alley. It's completely empty. That's good. She steps towards the corner of the building and takes a left at it, exiting from the back area. For a moment she stumbles, catching herself before she falls. Junko laughs under her breath and continues to walk. She's not used to the change in her depth perception.

The Girl from Ginza-2

"Hey! Hey!" I shout at the person laying face flat on the ground. I know people in this country need to participate in their nomikai or whatever but this chick must be totally sloshed. Face flat on the pavement in the rain. Normally I wouldn't intervene but it is getting pretty cold out, snow was mentioned as possible in the forecast. I should at least check on her. Always in the right place at the right time. These streets are completely deserted right now. Who knows how long she would've been out here. I slowly approach her body and crouch down to poke at her.

"Yo, are you ok? Hello? Can you hear me?" I take a look at her clothes; she's wearing something that looks like a kimono. The top is white and the bottoms are red. Something is wrapped around her head. Did someone attack her? What the hell happened? I tap her on the shoulder a few times to see if I'll get a reaction. I can hear her make some sort of noise and see her mouth open. Ok, she's not dead.

That's cool, I guess. I wonder if I should just wait for her to wake up. I look back down at her body; the kimono has some red underneath it too, mixing in with the puddles of water. Was she attacked? Hmm, I could just go back and find out what happened. Although if I go back in time, Aion will find me. What a dilemma I'm facing. Well no, it's fine. Local issues are not in my jurisdiction, especially those of a foreign country. I'll just help her get back on her feet and we'll go from there. Some R&R and she'll be good as new. I think I have some coffee left at my place, maybe something warm will help.

"Who… who are you?" A muffled voice almost hidden by the patter of rain escapes her mouth. She lives yet! Well seeing as she's in need of assistance and that I'm sort of here as law

enforcement. Alright, it's a stretch but I am sort of a cosmic law officer, maybe I can get some leeway with this if I tell her when she's more conscious.

"Oh, hi. I was just walking by, and I saw you were lying out in the middle of sidewalk here. Are you alright Miss?" I try to give her a reassuring smile, I don't want her to think I was messing with her or trying to rob her.

"I was… laying down in the middle of the sidewalk?" I nod my head at her.

"Yes, that's correct."

"Am… Am I no longer doing so?" I'm taken back by what she said and think about it. Is she no longer doing so? What does she mean?

"I'm sorry… I don't follow, what do you mean?" I can hear an exhausted breath leave her mouth as she moves a little in place.

"You said that wrong." I stare aghast at what she tells me. I thought I had done a pretty good job of study Japanese. My confidence takes a blow, but I suck it up and try to move the conversation forward.

"Oh, sorry. Uhm, do you need some help?" I extend my left hand out towards her and smile, hopefully she'll give me a better answer this time.

"Help? Oh I see. I'm fine, I must have slipped on this slick pavement. I'm sorry for making you worry about a stranger." She turns her head towards me. I can't see her eye on the left side of her face. It's wrapped up by what I can only assume is a part of the kimono. Blood seems to be running into the pavement from whatever wound is behind it.

"You look like you need help, are you sure you don't need any?" I keep my hand extended out, I'm not sure why I'm trying so hard to help her. No, of course I know why. It's the right thing to do.

"I'm fine. Really. I just need to pick myself up and…" She stops speaking, her forearms press against the ground and her body starts to rise up. She grunts and brings her right leg up, attempting

to stand her whole body up. She seemingly can't summon the strength to do so and falls back down.

"Ok, let's try your way." She says. I let an excess amount of air out of my nose, trying to suppress my laugh. She raises an arm and I take her left hand in mine. I pull her up and grab her other side, holding her in place to make sure she doesn't fall down.

"That wasn't so bad." I stare at her face and realise I probably shouldn't be doing that to a stranger. I probably shouldn't be treating her so casually either but at least she's not laying on the pavement anymore. The ground looks loose, that might be why she fell.

"It wasn't. Thank you for your assistance." She smiles back at me and then moves her right hand to cover her eye. Her head slides down and I can hear a sigh. Despite that, she's incredibly beautiful. This is that famed Japanese beauty. Her long, straight black hair is somehow not completely wrecked by the rain. Her bangs are gorgeous. That princess cut fits her small face incredibly well. She could be a model! The sides of her hair are cut about mid cheek level, it's a bit messier than the hair on her head. That's probably because she was laying on it.

"If… it's alright… would you mind letting go of me?" She says faintly. Now that I realise how close I am, I let go of her and step away from her. I look back at her and stare. She has a ghoulishly pale face. The edges of her uncovered eye, ears and lips have a bluish tint to them. She turns her face away from me, as if noticing that I noticed. Signs of central cyanosis or hypoxemia. Maybe I saw something that I wasn't supposed to.

"Is your eye ok?" Her hand remains on the eye patch. She's been stuttering in her speech, maybe she's still waking her body up. She's shaking now. Is the cool night air getting to her?

"No. I mean… it's fine… I'm… fine." She says. I feel bad. There's definitely something going on with her but, I can't force her to divulge that information. She looks a bit lost. Out of place. Like she wants to break down and cry. She looks like… me…

"I can call you cab if you'd like." I don't know why I said that. It costs an extra 20% at this hour.

I haven't been working much and I'm on the last breaths of my paycheque. If I was with Aion at her fancy place I wouldn't have to worry about money…

"No, it's fine, really. I just need to get my bearings." She replies. I sigh with relief and she turns towards me. Maybe she knows I'm broke. Ok, ideas Cass, ideas.

Her hair is starting to get wet in the rain. I'm soaked but I don't mind it. It's helping my mood. "I can walk you back to your house. Would you be ok with that?" I look at her, expecting another no.

"No. I don't want to trouble you anymore." There it is. I just feel bad. I can do something that Cass would. I can help someone. I just need an idea.

"What are you doing all the way out here then? Take a wrong turn?" Maybe making light of the situation would help.

"Yeah, something like that." I guess she's not going to give me a reason but, she gave me a hint of the nature of her being here. She's getting drenched now and we're just talking about nothing. In fact, she's as dripping wet as I am. Why did I say it like that…? Well at this point, I've wasted too much time to not help her. No sunk cost fallacy here, I'm going to help her and that's that.

"I don't live too far from here, a few blocks away and across the park. Do you want to rest at my place for the night?"

"Would that… be ok?" She's still holding her hand over her eye, but she turns towards me. She looks exhausted.

"Yeah, it's alright. It's nothing fancy but it's shelter from the rain. You don't need to worry about anything, I'm a detective from America. Not trying to trick you, I can show you my badge at home. I can whip you up a mean cup of coffee too, so you can shed off the cold night blanket covering you right now."

She smiles at me. I didn't expect that. She has a beautiful smile, although the discoloured skin leaves me a bit worried. She lifts her hand from her eye and puts them together, bowing her head

towards me.

“Ah, hey you don’t need to be so formal. I don’t mind helping.” I extend my hand back out to her and she carefully grabs it. Her body is shaking.

“Let’s get going then, follow me!” I say in a loud voice. She puts a single finger over her lips and smiles at me. I laugh a little, I said that too loud. I begin walking back home. I look back down at where she was laying. The red has mostly washed away, but the fact that it was there is still curious.

“Let me know if you need to rest or anything. It’s not too far but I don’t want to push yourself.”

“I think I’m better. I just got into and accident with my eye and it takes time to adjust.”

“Does it still hurt?”

“No, I’m fine. Really. I’ll be right behind you, just lead the way detective.” Oh, I hadn’t introduced myself. Maybe that’s a little rude. I invited her to my house before telling her my name. She hasn’t told me hers either. I guess we don’t need to share. I don’t look to well myself. I don’t even have an umbrella in weather like this. In this country always like this. Maybe I just like feeling the rain. The only thing I can feel anymore…

As we arrive at my apartment, she asks if she can shower. I nod to her and bring her some towels and clothes of my own to wear. Her outfit needs to dry and unfortunately I put my all clothes on a line out on the balcony, so we’ll just have to hope they dry inside overnight. Oh shit, my clothes are still outside! It's fine. Whatever.

I hand her what I gathered and walk her to the bathroom, I let her know she can take all the time she needs. She thanks me again and I head into the kitchen, brewing a pot of coffee for both of us. I turn the tv on for some background noise. I can’t stand silence anymore. Especially when my other half is lurking around. Fortunately they’ve been on good behaviour tonight.

“As enacted by the National Diet earlier this month, new laws went into effect on the 27th this week. Justice Minister Hideo Usui has said that the Public Security Investigation Agency, after

consulting with the National Police Agency, is expected to ask the Public Security Examination Commission on the same day to consider putting Aum Shinrikyo under surveillance. Hiroki Iwai, who formed the Anti-Aum committee earlier this year helped kick things off. As you may recall, members of Aum Shinrikyo were responsible for the deadly sarin gas attacks in the Tokyo metro in 1995 as well as the ones responsible for the Matsumoto Incident in 1994, which marked the first ever use of chemical weapons by a terrorist group."

My ears perk up at the news. That was four, five years ago. I heard about the incidents but didn't act upon it since Aion said there was no supernatural force at work. Just some crazies who think they're god's reincarnation or something. Dangerous things follow people who think like that. Thinking back on it, I've spent a lot of time in Japan so far. Maybe as much time as I have back home or well… "home." I turn the volume up a little and listen in.

"These laws also come off at the feet of two shocking incidents this year, being the Okegawa Stalking Murder and the Shimonoseki Station Massacre. The public is beginning to question if their safety is truly the number one priority of the National Police Agency and the Public Security Investigation Agency. Belief is fading in the agencies that are supposed to be protecting Japanese citizens, who have seen an uptick in major crimes around the country for the past decade and even extending back into the previous decade with the murder of Sakamoto Tsutsumi and his family. Sakamoto was a lawyer who had been working on a case against the Aum Shinrikyo. Will these new laws instil greater peace among the populace of Japan or are they largely targeted at maintaining the veil of peace?" I turn my head away from the tv and stare at the ceiling. Business as usual, no matter where you go, people are the same. Get their attention, scare them, and make money off of it. Not that this isn't important but this approach is just going to cause panic and… chaos…

I hear a sigh from down the hall and peek my head out over towards the sound. The mystery girl comes out of the bathroom fully dressed with a towel wrapped around her head, walking into the

living room. My kitchen is to the right of the living room, so they're really the same room, just separated by a single counter. I hand her the cup and offer sugar and creamer. She declines and takes a seat on the couch.

"Hey, I'll sleep here tonight. You can use my room. It was the door opposite of the bathroom." I say. She stares at me surprised. She still has a patch over her eye. Unfortunately, I don't carry much medicine or bandages. Never really needed to.

"Oh. Ok. If you don't mind it then I will." We stare at the tv, I change the channel to some random game show was on a rerun at this hour. We watch together for a bit before she picks herself up.

"What time is it?" She asks.

"Uh, 3:28. Ready to sleep?" She stares at me with a confused look on her face. It makes me feel nervous. Why does this make me feel nervous?

"How do you know what time it is? You don't have any clocks in here." I look to the side; I didn't have a good answer for that. Of course I don't need a clock. I just know the time in areas I'm in. Quick Watson, think of something. Anything.

"Oh well… I go out for walks at… two in the morning for about an hour." That sounded so dumb oh my god. How do I prove the time now without having a clock?

"Interesting… Early bird huh? Well, where is your clock then?" Why does she need the clock so badly? I don't have one! Damn!

"It's in m-my room! I have it on the nightstand!" No you don't stupid! Where are you going to get a clock? How? It then dawned on me, if I freeze time and "borrow" one I could pull this off. But the second I do it… Aion finds me. I can't let the mystery girl find out anything about me though. Maybe I should've let her lay on that pavement after all. Ugh, I hate to do this, but I can't think of anything else right now. All these late nights have left me sleep deprived. I'm not as clear minded as

I usually am.

“Keh heh heh, you're kinda fun. I saw it! The time was on the program we were watching.” She says.

“O-oh! Yeah I mean that too ahah.” My nervous laughter isn't doing me any favours.

“It’s a new day then… A couple hours ago it became the 28th… Well if it’s ok, I’ll be heading to sleep.” She turns around and walks down the hall. I smile and wave at her until she’s about midway in the hall. That first part didn’t sound like it was for me. Whatever, I need to fix this stupid little mistake I made.

Ok Watson, just find a clock. Shouldn’t be too hard. Maybe the lobby on the bottom floor, there’s one down there. I take a deep breath and stop the current flow of time. I run out of my room, down the stairs and into the lobby, searching for the clock. It’s hung up on the wall. That’s right, it’s an older, circular analogue clock. She’s going to think I’m mental for placing this on my nightstand…

I reach for the time teller, it’s 3:31. In the back of my body I feel *it*. No not *it*. *Her*. I know where she is, and she knows where I am. My heart sinks. It feels like I did something wrong. I’ll have to prepare for her to arrive now. I head back up the stairs and return to my apartment. I never imagined my night would’ve ended like this. My anxious feelings skyrocket now that Aion is aware of my presence. Maybe that’s why I wanted to walk tonight. To look for an excuse to have her find me. I walk past the frozen girl inside and enter my room, placing the out of place clock on the nightstand. I return to the hall and glance at her face. I feel as if she watched me walk out of my room just now. I wave my hand in front of her face, seeking some sort of reaction to it. I swear her eye followed me around. I must be seeing things. It was probably my imagination. I’m tired and an emotional mess on the inside. I should try sleeping.

I return to the living room, setting the scene up to how it was before time stopped. I wait to exit the frozen world’s grasp. 60 times now. I have to wait a full minute until undoing the freeze.

Annoying. Why is there so much I have to worry about? As the minute passes I return to smiling and waving. Time resumes and the girl walks down the hall and into my room. The door opens and shuts. I lay down on the couch. An audible laugh travels down the hall and into my ears. How ridiculous. I can’t believe I went out of my way like that.

One Dream-3

"And as always, I imagine you were there."

"Yeah?" I can't see her face but I know she's talking to me. It's odd, dizzying and gives me butterflies in my stomach.

"How you would hold my hand."

"How it would fit in mine."

"How it would look like to walk beside you."

"What kind of stores we would go to."

"How you would react to things."

"What food we'll get."

"Everything."

"The more I'm surrounded by people, the more I feel alone."

"Cass… I…" As most of our conversations now go, our sentences end in sighs. I wonder what she would answer with. How do I speak to her again? I shut my eyes and stare at the darkness, opening them to the couch's cushion.

Ah, I fell asleep. It was a dream. A real dream.

Hey, there's some girl wandering around your room. Who is she and why is she here?

I don't know who she is, but she looked like she needed help, so I helped her.

You just let some stranger into your room? What if she killed you?

If she killed me then the most annoying roommate in the world would've gotten back at her. It's fine. I'll offer her some breakfast then send her on her way.

Can I?

No, absolutely not. If you're anxious for some action just wait until Chrono gives us another case. Then you can… do whatever it is you do.

I feel myself gag a little at the thought. Not something I want to hear or imagine at seven in the morning. Well I guess that means the girl is awake. I'll go check on her and ask how she's doing. I walk down my little hallway and knock on my door.

"Hey, are you awake?" I'm met with silence unfortunately. Was she making it up and lying to me?

I'm not lying. She was up. I saw her.

I knock again and call out louder this time.

Just open the door.

No that's rude.

Rude? This is your house, just go inside.

"Rude? What would be rude?" The voice surprises me. It comes from behind. The lady without a name is in the bathroom.

"Oh? Rude? Huh?" I turn around and to my surprise, I see the woman from last night. She's significantly less disheveled than before.

"Were you talking to someone just now?" Ugh she heard? That's annoying. Let's think of something to say.

Tell her you're insane and respond to the voice in your head.

"Oh I just, think out loud sometimes! That's all. Heh…" *Smooth detective.*

"Ah, I've heard some people do that. Thank you for allowing me to stay the night and letting me clean myself up." Straight eyebrows and surprisingly long eyelashes. Her ink black hair is tied up in a bun. Her eye reflect hues of brown back into the world. Black hair and brown eyes, I suppose that's standard for east Asians. She's pretty though. Really pretty. Why am I thinking that?

“D-don’t mention it. I just wanted to return some of the kindness that I’ve been shown in Japan. Do you need a change of clothes or something?” I say as I get out of her way, walking away and back to the living room.

“It is alright, my clothes are dry now. Thank you for the offer though.” She smiles and waves at me before entering my room again.

Nobody would know.

I would know, now stop asking. She already heard us talking once, just stay quiet until she’s gone. Can you do that? Are you capable of behaving for like 30 minutes?

The phone in the room begins to ring before either of us can follow up with another thought, I move to answer it. There are only a handful of people with my number so it’s more than likely that this call is work related. The stranger has returned to my room, this should be safe to answer.

“Hello?”

“Cass? It’s me, Chrono.” Speak of the devil.

“Oh, hey. What do you need?”

“It’s you, right? You, you. Not the other you?” He replies. What a weird way of saying that.

“Yeah, I’m here. Normal as can be.”

“Good. I have some work for you. A place I’d like you to investigate for me. I can’t get ahold of Aion, for better or worse, so I’m just going to give this to you directly.”

“You wanted to get a hold of her first? Then this must be something dangerous.”

“Not dangerous per se but I have faith in your ability. It recently occurred nearby your location so it’s really a matter of convenience. I’ll summon you shortly.” I pull down on the cord of the phone and sigh. I can’t exactly leave this stranger alone in my house. I can’t freeze time and simultaneously accept the summon either.

“Would you give me like, ten maybe fifteen minutes?”

“Hmm? For what?” He replies.

“I have a guest over. I can’t just leave her.”

“A guest? Over? HER? Interesting. Late night pillow fight?”

“Shut up. Just give call back later. Ok?” I shake my head, my eyes rolling across the room.

“Right. The next time I call, you accept the summon. No ifs, ands or… butts…” I slam the phone down and sit on the couch. Ridiculous. I was only trying to help someone.

“Bad time? Sorry.” I turn around and see the girl standing at the hallway entrance. I awkwardly wave and smile at her, I hate being responsible for my actions when others are around me. She probably thinks I’m super weird now.

“Oh, just a call from work. They said something I didn’t like, and I got upset. Sorry you had to see that.” Did he call at this time just to mess with me?

“It’s fine, work happens right? I’ll be on my way now, thank you for your hospitality.” She bows her head at me and starts walking towards the door. I guess she’s trying to not be a bother anymore. Well, I won’t keep her any longer than she wants to be here.

“Your hair, you should dye it again, it’s getting pretty faded.” My hair? Huh? What an odd final comment to make. She slips her feet into her shoes at the genkan and opens the door. She turns around and bows to me again before hopping out. I close the door and sit on the couch. She’s pretty forward for a Japanese person. I guess I’ll just wait for the call and go from there. I stare at the tv for a few moments before turning it on. The local news. Nothing interesting.

Your hair did look better before.

Ah, before? Hmm before what? What happened to me that ruined my hair?

Just making conversation. You could refresh the dark colours with the despair of your enemies.

Enemies? I don’t have enemies. Nor will I cover my head in their blood.

We can swap. You’ll look like the old you again in the visage.

It'd be easier to just get some hair dye. I'm not sure how I feel about you taking control when work is on the horizon.

C'mon, I'm bored to death sleeping all day.

Oh, you poor ancient evil… Having nothing to do all day…

Don't patronise me!

The phone rings again, cutting my personal issue off for the time being. I answer it and immediately start getting blasted with information. He's surprisingly worse at this than Aion was. I don't think he's very organised or knows enough about managing this sort of thing but someone needs to do the job and he's at least trying.

"So this is a bit of an interesting case. Two dozen or so murders, a massacre really, of prominent politicians, police and otherwise influential people occurred in the Suitomo building in Shinjuku. Fortunately, that's your neck of the woods, right?"

"Yeah I have a little place in San-Cho-me."

"Sanchome? What's that a fish?"

"It's the name of the area dude. San-Chome. San like 3." This guy is not as good at this as Aion was…

"Oh I see. So like, Shinjuku District 3?"

"Yeah sorta. Anyways, I'm in the area and I haven't heard about this on the news. Why are we getting involved?"

"Right erm… It's basically a locked room case. Whoever did it, did it without a trace. Ripped the hearts out of everyone at this party then vanished. Nobody can speak up about it because nobody is alive. There isn't a witness, all we had was a glimpse of the scene before some difficulties arose."

"No witnesses? Then how do you know their hearts were ripped out? And what difficulties?"

"It goes a little beyond that. That's why I'm contacting you. Nobody can get inside this room.

They end up back on the first floor of the building, they can't say why. The only thing that's been brought to me is that team members hear whispers when approaching the room. We had one person get a glimpse inside the room at 3:30am local time. We deduced, based on what they had seen, carvings into the chests of the victims bodies. I can give you the file later." He says. 3:30? I was rushing down to the apartment lobby, trying to get a stupid clock at around the same time. Oh and now I have to return that stupid clock.

"And where did it happen? A suite up on the top floor?" I ask.

"Yes. What I want you to do is twofold Cass. First, ascertain the existence of this room and gain entry to it. Secondly, find our killer and either catch them before the act or track them to wherever they went after the crime." I laugh under my breath, that's a pretty simple job.

"So you want me to go in, rewind time, catch your murderer and be back home by 5:00? You wanted Aion to do this? She'd be upset with you for wasting her time like this."

"I don't like the nature of the crime Cass. Better safe than sorry. Unless you want to try asking her for me?" I don't know if I should be lying to Chrono about this but right now, I can't…

"I… don't know where she is either. Past, present, or future. Sorry."

"Guess you spent your Christmas alone. Ah, sorry. Ahem, well that's why I have you. Oh right, I'll need your eyes for this." His voice perks me back up, I'm not overly positive about what he just said.

"My eyes?"

"Yes, I'd like a transcript of everything you encounter for data preservation. Should we need it."

"Fine, whatever. Anything else I need to know?"

"The nature of the crime is highly unusual. More than likely it's supernatural but what creature would design such a targeted attack? It could be a force of chaos, someone looking to destabilise things." He says.

“The Japanese economy has been suffering this entire decade, I’d say the destabilisation is already well at work here.” I reply.

“You know what I mean. There’s a difference between killing prominent people of power and a temporary economic recession. Things like that Aum Shinrikyo business. I don’t want any mass murderers or doomsday cults getting their way here. Got it?”

“Got it.” I didn’t think he’d be so… Aion-like about it, I was just teasing a little bit.

“Anyways, I’m going to put out a summon in a moment. Take it and we’ll do the rest together at the facility, is that alright?” He turns away and I nod again, as if he can see me. I’m a little excited if I’m being honest. I’ve been so action starved lately. Did I always feel like this in between cases?

The Killers/2

I push my curtains aside and open the window, welcoming in the rays of light that were hidden behind. It looks like it'll be a clear day today. Finally, a break from all the rain.

"Xīngān, we have a new job today. From the boss themselves." The breeze from outside can travel inside much easier now. Steps approach from behind me, she's up. Her arms wrap around me, her warm breath pushes the cool air away.

"From the boss?" Her morning voice is so husky, deep, and gravely. I relish the opportunity to experience it for these few minutes every day.

"I already found her. She's a foreign cop. I need you to watch over the suite."

"I have a shadow there. You would rather me be there myself?"

"Yes. It's not by chance that she showed up. The boss specifically asked for her. The detective will seek out the scene. She'll find the room and when she does…"

"Devour her?"

"No, the boss wants to meet her first. So we need to find her and bring her in."

"Trick her? Lock her in a nightmare?"

"Yes."

"Can we get ready together first?" Her arms pull my shirt over my head. My cool, pale, icy skin radiates the light into all corners of the room. Somewhere on the floor my shirt falls. A hand tightly grips my neck. The other forces its way into my pyjama pants. I feel fingers brush over my lips and instinctively shut my legs.

"Aggressive today aren't you?"

"You were gone for the rest of night…" I lean my body back into hers. Admittedly, I couldn't get

home on my own. Leaping from the building and shielding my landing took more than I thought. I can feel her lips press against the nape of my neck. The spots she attack feel wet and warm.

"We shouldn't have split up but, it was the safest option. Nobody knows what happened and by the time they do, we'll be long gone. Just one more… job." My concentration is broken by the speed of her fingers rubbing against me. A rush. Pleasure.

"One more job. Then we go. Return." She lets go of my neck and pulls me back by my hair. Her lips plant over mine, we kiss. I can feel the hearth in my chest burn hotter and hotter. The longer we kiss the more energy she pours into me. I pull myself away after a few minutes of indulging, returning to give my love a quick peck on the cheek.

"All those party goers must've given you quite the fill."

"You know men, all the same. Power, money, influence, they were fat, ripe with life to thieve away." She pushes her face into my neck, shifting between bites and kisses. Her lower middle finger extends inwards and starts to rub on my insides. I can't help but let out whimpers of pleasure as she conquers my body. I let my arms travel back, reaching into her bottoms, hoping to share some of the pleasure with her. She peels me off of her and aggressively pushes me down. I'm lovingly shoved onto the bed. She looks down at me and smirks. I hear her kick away some of the left-over bones she left around the footing of the bed. She pulls my panties down and getting on her knees. She grabs my waist and tugs at me, telling me to bring my body in closer to her so she can properly service me.

"May I?" She somehow says, with her mouth full of my inner thighs. The room is so hot. I can't tell if it's the light of the outside world or the mixing and clashing of our spirits.

"Take as much as you need, for a job well done." I rest my head back into the bed and set my hands on her head. She does deserve a lot for the job she immaculately performed yesterday. The sting of four incredibly sharp objects send shocks throughout my body. Her fangs pierce me, spilling

plentiful blood from my body. Her teeth shine and glisten in the morning light. Melding impeccably with the crimson pouring out of the impressions upon my body. I don't care about much I lose, as long as she has her fill. I feel my skin split and tear apart over and over again. I am no more than a piece of paper being shredded.

"Is… is it good?" I let out an anguished yelp, I don't know exactly when this started feeling pleasurable, but I love it now. I squeeze on her, pulling her hair and wrapping my legs around her neck. She can't escape my lock and I hers. My life essence for my Goddess.

"Delicioush dear…" She says slightly slurred. Her face pulls away from being buried in my most delicate area. I can feel my head getting lighter, as if I've become a balloon filled with helium. The more she drinks the better it feels. The tension, the buildup, the pay off. She's making me feel better, beyond any carnal pleasure my body has been given in my life. This addicting feeling, gives me the ultimate high. I don't care how much she drinks, even if it ends up killing me.

She raises her head further upward, sliding her bloody jaw across my stomach and torso. Fitting snugly in my chest, I rub her head as tenderly as I would my own body.

"Worried?"

"Not at all. We'll find the girl and finish the job. This will tie everything together." I struggle to support my own weight and fall backwards into the bed. She crawls around me and lifts me up, holding my upper torso in her arms like a small animal or a baby.

"Will you return home tonight?" Her eyes look into mine and I nod at her. I would've preferred to rest more today but oh well. The Boss gets what the Boss wants. Not going to argue this late into the game.

"I'll be home tonight. No mistakes this time. I love you, Yidhra."

"I love you too, Junko."

08-M08+09–4

“Welcome back Cass. You should be good as new now. The swap went off without issue.” A male voice is speaking. The swap is done. Everything should be fine?

“Chrono, is that you?” As I wake up, the bright lights crash into me. I stare into the all too familiar view, I am unable to distinguish any of the figures I expected to see. The plain, boring walls of the lab, it’s cold machinery and the lifeless medical pods meld into one another as a massive singular structure. Noticeably absent is the visual source of the voice calling to me.

“I decided to play it safe for the operation so I had your consciousness uploaded to the AI. The transfer worked flawlessly, nothing to worry about. There’s an upload of your mind in the archive, it includes Nyarlathotep, if you were wondering. Your body is safe and sound in one of the coolers. You look like you need the rest anyways.” He nonchalantly replies. My body is safe and sound? Cooler? Does that mean… Wait, coolers?!

“COOLERS? You know I don’t like it when you call them that. It’s a treatment pod. What the hell did you do Chrono? Does Aion have to do this too?” I push my arm out and stretch my hand. It looks like the real thing, feels like it too. You would never guess this was some sort of cyborg body. Not that anybody would since only like four of these things exist. Five now I suppose.

“Aion? Of course she does. I do too. She used to do everything in a mechanical body before you had beaten her. The perfect vessel for the perfect being, so to speak.”

“I’m a God too! Don’t I get a choice?” Maybe I’m not going the best way about all of this but, I really wish that he mentioned this was going to happen. I lay uneasy, waiting for his voice to further fill my mind with stress and anxiety.

“You are Kairos. But you’re also human. Your power is perfect opportunity. Ergo you have

perfect timing. Better than Aion or myself. On top of that Aion taught you time travel and I taught you time control. You're the most impressive Kairos to exist. Trust me, things will be safer this way. Your body is tougher, the data recording process is more streamlined. It's a win- win." I can't tell if Chrono is praising me or insulting me.

"Look, it sounds bad, but it comes from a good place. It's rare for Aion and myself to ever interact this much with a Kairos. Being God of Opportunity is probably the best power over time one could have. The downside is you can't pick the opportunities, you're just kind of forced to deal with the era you show up in. You are here for a reason Cass."

"I'm here for a reason? Was it because of AO? The villain behind the technology we're using? Whom I already stopped mind you. Or was it because of Aion? The one who abdicated her duties to end all time itself? How did those two even get permission to work on the archive in the first place?"

"I will admit that letting Aion make the decisions without supervision is an err on my part. In this timeline I jumped the gun rather quickly. However, that is a discussion for later. As for why you showed up, I can't pinpoint the exact event that called you to this era. Fate works in strange ways. You've done a lot with your time so far. I know you stopped AO. Before that you stopped Aion. You've done a great service for humanity." Chrono says.

"Is that what I exist for? I'm the defender of humanity?" I reply.

"Don't think about it in those terms. You've done much good. At the end of the day, you're still Cassandra Watson. You possess the power to choose. Several creatures have already gone to great lengths to rob you of it."

"Despite you freely removing my humanity from me and turning me into a monster for this investigation?" As if timed by that exact phrase, my vision returns to what my brain expects to see. There's Chrono. His same suit, hair, style, stupid punchable face.

“What I’m getting at here is, you’ll have time to be you again one day. I nor Aion have such luxury and right now, we both need you.” Chrono says. He approaches me and rubs my shoulder. My face must’ve sunk into a deep frown because I think he’s trying to cheer me up.

“Moving forward, I’d like you to do what we discussed before. Make your way to the scene for me and gather data on what occurred there. My team is already on site and knows you’re coming so you’ll be able to get right to work.” He was quick to move on… It makes me feel like I’m an underling despite everything I’ve done so far. I guess two stopping universal level threats isn’t enough to impress him.

“Send me back and I’ll check out your crime scene. I used to do this all the time for Aion.” I step away from the treatment pod and out into the greater floor. Kass is resting right now so this will be a quick and quiet job.

“Read the file when you arrive. There are numerous victims in that room and I don’t want you becoming one. I am giving you full authority over this case. In addition, you’ll cooperate with my team on the scene in case things take a dangerous turn. Not saying they will but, keep it in mind. This may very well be the event I told you about back in Tintagel. Now, step into the summoning circle here and I’ll send you there Cass.” I haven’t been given full authority before. Aion always takes care of the big things. Although, this is probably some small-time disturbance anyways. They just have a little magic trick that only I am able to beat

“Understood.” I reply, stepping into the glowing blue circle he made. I wave goodbye to Chrono. He snaps his fingers and instantly I find myself back in my living room. I can’t help but think back to that girl. She left so hastily, and I never even got her name. I guess things are just like that sometimes. Oh well, time for work.

I go into the kitchen and pull out some knives from the drawer. I have to admit, these things are getting fun to use. They’re not long like swords and they’re much easier to conceal. Not that I need

to be particularly worried about concealing them but it's simply cool. I return to the living room to grab my coat and shut off the television. I wonder what I'll find at the scene. It's at the top suite of some special building. That's definitely executive level. So you'd need to be pretty special to even get up there. I can think about the rest on the way there.

I make my way across town by walking. Perhaps it was a bit too leisurely and slow, but I don't want to appear like I'm anyone special. Not drawing attention to myself is the first step to all this. I make my way down the road where I had found that girl. I should probably go back and properly get information out of her; it is suspicious that she was out there like that. I'll do that after this job. As I get closer to the Suitomo building I stare at the top, I can't see any sort of broken windows or openings from here. Although I suppose if there were some they'd be all over the news. Before entering I take a few steps further to the edges of the building, looking for any foul play. There are a multitude of routes a criminal can take to escape from a scene. The alleys look fairly open, no disturbances to the rubbish bins and nothing looks out of place. I imagine the team Chrono has here swept the grounds already. He mentioned a file so it's probably in there. I turn back towards the building and enter through the front. It looks like every other busy lobby in a Japanese building, nothing particularly interesting. I make my way to the stairwell and hear some footsteps rushing up behind me.

"Excuse me, are you Ms. Watson? The elevator to the…" I cut the other investigator off by putting my index finger against my lips. The universal sign to tell someone to be quiet.

Although the elevator is a quicker and easier way up, I'm willing to bet nobody took the stairs up. I can't do whatever one else has done; I need to go in with a fresh approach. A different way so I can catch the magical mechanism off guard.

"45th floor." They whisper into my ear and then nod at me. I nod back then turn towards the door, opening it. Although admittedly, climbing up 45 floors is not something I look forward to. The

stairwell contains the echoes of visitors and others who are chatting away about various things. Apparently there are some great restaurants at the very top, if I do this job quickly maybe I can check them out. If they're open that is. The higher I get, the quieter the voices become and in turn, the louder my footsteps are. I shift the weight on my feet to press down lighter with each step, from toe to heel. It's slower but my steps are now silent. Fortunately the stairwell has the floor number painted on the wall next to their exit doors. At 30 onward it feels like an abandoned building. The lively gathering at the lobby level is a world apart. You'd never be able to tell if something happened on any of these higher floors from below. I glance up at the number 40 and catch my breath. I'm excited to see what's hiding on the 45th floor. Why am I so excited? My steps bring me to my destination. I stand before the door to the unknown source of my giddiness.

I brace the door a bit with my body, feeling for any weight against it. It's light. I turn the knob slowly, to try and keep it silent as I open the door. I creep my head forward and peek into the area. Apparently, everyone hears whispers as they enter the area then, with no explanation, return to the lobby. So far it's silent.

Now this could be for a few reasons. I'm immune to the whispers because my head is already full of them. Or because the thing here hasn't noticed me. Or because the thing isn't here right now. Or because the trick only works from the elevator. Whatever it is, I think I can safely enter. I push the rest of my body inside and try to close the door the same way I opened it, leaving no room for noise to be made. The floor is covered by a deep, grizzly looking shade of red. That's confirmation of some sort of physical violence. It must be an exceptional amount to soak itself so thoroughly into the carpet. Well, my body is recording it, as uncomfortable as that thought is. I'm Chrono's eyes and ears, the data should be feeding directly to his computer system.

I put my index finger into my mouth to wet it with saliva then hold it out. Let's see if where the air flows. I guess I should've had the building's schematic requested but this is fine. It's been awhile

since something this exciting happened. I'm getting back into the flow. Oh, there's a breeze but it's from behind me because I've just entered the hall, thus ruining the test for me. Everything but my brain was upgraded…

I shrug and continue down the hall peering at the trail of blood. It's dry. Obviously it was dry Watson, this isn't an active crime scene. Actually, the processing for this is going to be much quicker and easier thanks to these modifications. Although I won't be able to take anything for preservation, I didn't bring any kits. I'm sure the others can do it, I just needed to get in here and find whoever did whatever happened. I step down into the middle of the hallway, where two large doors are shut. I assume inside was where everything took place. There's no blood on the door though, interesting. How did blood get outside of the room then? Oh what am I thinking? You're a time traveler idiot, just play the scene back! I spy some sort of receptionist desk on the opposite side of the doors. There are also doors next to the desk. Those must lead from the elevator.

I walk behind the desk and stare at the doors hiding the rest of the crime scene before crouching down. I close my eyes and push time back. As the scene rewinds, I peek over. Someone burst out of the room in a panic. Blood colours their clothing in despair. It looks like he's running away from something. Fortunately, that something quickly comes out after him. Wait a second, I'm unable to ascertain who or what this creature is. They're form is blurry. I pause time, approaching whatever this thing is. I need to see them. But the closer I get, the more their image twists and distorts. It's as if the light is being reflected off of them to protect their image. On top of that, the inside of my head beings to burn. Staring at this thing is painful. What a fearsome ability. A monster even I can't see… That's pretty cool! I wonder how it will look on the recording, maybe it's distorted because these aren't my true eyes. Even so, I'll have to let Chrono know about this.

I walk back behind the desk counter and return my focus to the man. I almost forgot this guy was about to be murdered. Well, he's certainly giving it his all. I let things resume and as predicted, the

hysteric man is caught. He screams out in terror as the unknown figure's hand tugs on something. I can't get a look at what's in hand, but the motion reminds me of someone yanking on a video game controller's cable. This is hard to listen to and even harder to watch.

In the single moment between my thoughts, the invisible cord rips away. What happened? It's… his heart!? The whole thing just flew out of his chest! Guess that explains the stains on the floor out here. The figure tortuously shakes and convulses, placing the fresh meat into what I imagine is its mouth and chomps down. Not much else those movements could represent. A very clean kill that was exceptionally performed. It drags the dead body back into the room. So the monster is good at this. Better than good, that was flawless. This case's danger level is going up.

I snap my fingers and return to the present, I want to take a look inside the room. I hop from behind the counter and approach the doors again. Looking around, other than the blood, there isn't a lot going on here, at least out in the hall. I open the middle doors to investigate. My field of vision is unfortunately bombarded by an extremely grim paradise. I'm not sure how many bodies I'm looking at, but Chrono's info has the right of it. This is a serious case. Not that the scene I just watched didn't already make it one but this many killings is certainly a heinous crime.

This isn't a murder or two, this is a full-blown massacre. Five, ten, fifteen, twenty…28… 28 bodies… I creep into the former living room and take a closer look at the bodies. They look like dolls. Ceramic like skin that folded itself in the form of human beings. All of their chests are ripped open. They must have died same way the man outside of the room did.

What else is here? Heading deeper into the room, I spy some curious tables. A couple of naked women are laying on top of them. As gross as that is aside, it seems not even innocents were spared here. Whatever that mystery monster was, it certainly had its fill. I approach the bodies of the women, bits of sushi are lying around them and down below on the floor. Bottles of sake line up underneath the table as well. Their hearts are missing. Every deceased person in this room has the

same, red, gaping wound on their chests. Perhaps Dracula has descended upon Tokyo.

So far, the majority of the victims are men. Ten are police or appear police affiliated based on their uniforms. The two women are more than likely, uninvolved. Probably purchased for the entertainment of the men. I need to identify the remaining sixteen men who aren't in uniform are and try finding out their relation to this. Most of them are well dressed in exceptionally expensive-looking suits.

Looking around the room itself, the scene is immaculate. There are no broken doors, windows, vents, anything of the sort. I pick myself up and walk around, discovering a door hidden away in the far left corner of the room. It's a traditional style Japanese door and blends in with the wall. The body of the man killed outside of the room is laid up against the wall. So nauseating. Certainly one of the worst scenes I've ever come across in my time. I approach the door and take a deep breath, sliding it open and peering into the deepest depths of the crime scene.

I can't say I'm surprised by what I see. Two more bodies are in here. Two men laying on a bed, together, naked and dead. My preliminary glance of this room is that it's noticeably darker in here, there's a uniform laying on the floor and a suit hanging over a chair at a small round table. There is some sort of drug paraphernalia on the table, but drugs are certainly not going to be the cause of death. There's a nightstand that has a clock on it. A normal clock. 12日29日１９９９年 with the numbers１０：３４ below the date. Chrono's informant arrived at 3:30 on the 28th. They don't know when exactly these murders happen. I put my finger into my mouth again and tried to feel around for any flow of air. It's stale, dank and would make most people vomit but I'm not too bothered by it. At least I don't feel judged around this crowd…

The air is still, which is fortunately working in favour of our killer. Nobody will smell this floor from other ones; they'd need to be directly in it. Not that anybody can be near this floor anyways, the whispers or whatever. I don't see any air vents either, perhaps they're on the ceiling or behind

the bed. Well not like that matters too much either. The vents in the other room weren't very large anyway.

I begin investigating the identity of the men by checking the suit's pockets for anything that could identify one of them. In the pocket is a ritzy wallet. I open it up and find an identification card. Hiroki Iwai. Oh, I heard that name this morning! This is the guy who spearheaded the Anti-Aum committee. He's a politician.

Then… is that the link? Are these all people involved with taking down the Aum Shinrikyo cult by limiting their activities and monitoring them with those new laws? A possible connection but the number of people who could pull this off is low. Well, not that low with this monster on their side. So I can surmise that these rooms are full of police officers and politicians connected to that cult in some way, shape, or form. The only thing left to do is to go back in time and watch the whole scene play out. I'll be able to find out why these two were in a room separate from all of the others, which admittedly is further encouraging my curiosity.

I need a good place to spy on all of the debauchery of the night without being spotted, there isn't a whole lot for me to work with though. If only I could go back like Aion and not be noticed. Well, she's a God after all. She can conceal her presence when she wants. I mean, I'm also one but, I've not practiced it. Only in situations where I need something, do I realise I can't do it. I could've spent more time training or practicing instead of moping around all day like a crybaby.

My self-loathing aside, I notice there is a fair amount of space underneath the bed. The bed duster also does a decent job of hiding what's underneath, this could work. Well, this is the best choice for now. I crouch down and crawl into the darkness of the bed's undercarriage. Hmm, if they have sex or something, the bottom side of the bed is going to push down on me. I'm not sure why I'm thinking of these two old, dead, Japanese men having sex outside of a party but now that scene is playing out in my head. Sorry brain.

I snap my fingers and push the clock back to the night of the events. I roll it to 1:00am, deep into the night of the 28th. The lights remain the same dim shade, maybe to fit a certain mood. There is lots of laughter and chatting going on in the other room. Glass being tapped into glass, perhaps the people making a toast to their success or something similar. Nothing out of place so far.

Perhaps this an inside job? Someone infiltrated the team and worked their way up on behalf of that cult? Nobody has entered this room yet and it's been about ten minutes, maybe it would've been better to watch from the other side and take note of when this room is accessed. I rub my brow with my right hand and silently sigh, I'm an idiot. The lively party continues its jovial mood for five more minutes until my daydreaming is finally interrupted by the door opening up. I hear a woman's laughter and see heels step into the room. They're being worn by a woman who is especially pale. Her skin noticeably stands out in the ambient lighting. Behind her are two sets of shoes. There are the two men who are still in here. That must be my police office and politician. So, someone else was here, but I don't recall seeing a corpse of this woman's body in here.

The Nyotaimori have stayed silent. They're not allowed to speak under any circumstances. I haven't heard any female voices while waiting. I don't think either of them had this skin tone either so this woman must be special. The sound of objects being dropped on the table in here give a little bit of life to the room. One of the men turn back towards the door to shut it. I can hear clothes being removed and watch them drop onto the floor. The police officer's uniform that's closer to the door, he's the one who shut it. I can partly see another guy pulling his pants out from under his feet. There's the suit. This person must be the politician. The clothing on the floor is eventually accompanied by a 3rd pair. It's a kimono, an extremely nice- looking kimono. Definitely silk although I can only make out the white coloured top, the other half is too dark. That'll be something to keep in mind. Shortly after, a bra falls down, quickly accompanied by a pair of panties. I can paint the picture that's going on above. Ok, so they entered at 1:25 and got busy after that, let's

speed things up a bit to find out when the murders occur. It has to happen before 3:30.

I push the flow of time faster; it only slightly makes me feel like a creep for listening to this threesome going on. It's so weird. What an invasion of privacy and a critical part of my job right now. I notice a pair of feet land on the ground from the bed, something's happening. After 24 minutes, a quiet pitter patter runs toward the clothing on the ground. The pale feet almost vanish in the darkness, I can see an arm reach down to the kimono to pick it up. I assume she's getting dressed because they finished their little activity. There was no kimono on the ground when I entered the room. Looks like I've found a prime suspect. How she did it, I don't know yet. I wonder if she's the creature I saw earlier or simply working with it but this is the person is now priority number one.

"Ufufufu. There's my little mouse!" Hmm? I pause and look back. I swear I heard a woman right behind me. I stare at the floor and wall, there's nothing there. No other pairs of feet leave the bed. What did I just hear?

In the moment I looked away, the screams of all the victims enters my ears. Pained and anguished cries of suffering bombarded me from above and beyond the doors. The killer already started?! How did she do it? She only left for a moment! Ok I need to pause time and get a look at everything. That's why I'm here. I take a silent deep breath and pause the ongoing scene, as if I just hit a button on a remote. I get out from underneath the bed and look at the two men.

They're reaching for their chests, or rather, the remains. A large hollow gap and empty spots where their hearts should be. I'm willing to bet these two and everyone else just died at the same time, the same way. I turn around, I need to discover the identity of the woman who was with them. Chrono will take care of the scene, I need to take care of the culprit.

To my utmost shock and astonishment, the woman I see before me is one I know, or at least I think I know. I fall onto my bottom and stare up with my mouth most certainly hanging wide open

dumbfounded. God damn it! Why did this happen? Why now?! I clench my fist and punch it on the floor, I can't believe this and yet, I should've expected it honestly. The most awful feeling is the one that drops my stomach, the shyness, and odd sensations of guilt. I can't even think straight when I see her. Every hair on my body stands up and I feel the adrenaline fuel my flight or fight response. Which should be regulated by this body which isn't even mine yet I still feel this way about her! I hate that it fills me with these complex emotions and catches me off guard so thoroughly. Of course she's here, I forgot all about her. It's as if something has invaded my brain and wormed its way into the core and tells me with every fibre of my being that I shouldn't be around this woman that I desperately hate! This woman I desperately missed! This woman I desperately run from. This woman I desperately love…

"Cass, we need to talk." Her voice calls out to me. I eye her carefully, realising that my bottom is still intimate with the floor below me, I pick myself up and brush down my butt, trying to not look like a complete screw up. Just talk to her, as a professional, that's all.

"What is it Aion? I'm in the middle of a case if you can't tell."

"I just wanted to tell you that I'll be around for the next week or so. Off the record of course. You should come by after work, I'd like to…"

"Aion do you not see this? There's a supernatural murderer here and these room are full of dead bodies! Maybe that doesn't bother you but it's my job." I cut her off in a quick reply, I'm processing so much in my head right now. Why is she here? I need to catch this murderer and fix… everything…

"Cass, the case is fine. You'll solve it like you always do."

"Then why are you here Aion? Why now?!"

"Well, I was curious. You've been standing alone in this room all day."

"What?"

"You had time paused here for a while now. It got me curious. 60 seconds now, right?"

"Don't keep count, it's creepy." Not to mention I already passed sixty… annoying…

"Is it? I'm sorry." She sounded almost regretful; I've never heard her voice inflect emotion like that. Aion…

"It's fine, I'm sorry. I'm just, I was in the zone. This is my first big solo case. I wanted to perfectly complete it." I sigh at the end of my sentence and look at her.

"Of course. What kept you here for so long however?" I have no recollection of spending a significant amount of time here. What does she mean by that? Did something happen to me?

"Aion, it's not been that long. I've been here an hour at most." She raises her eyebrow curiously at me and looks into the room.

"Investigating? Here? This room is empty Cass. You've been here from sunrise to sunset alone and then frozen time, staying in here for even longer." The possibility of her words being true disturb me, but I know it's impossible. I was just under the bed watching everyone be killed by that woman. I turn around to from where I crawled from, and my breath starts shaking. It's empty?! This isn't the Suitomo Building, this is my room! What happened? Where are the bodies?! No clothing scattered around the floor! There is no killer that I can identify for my case. I pop my head out of the door. It's my empty hallway. There is nothing here…

"Aion? What happened? There was a whole scene here. A whole murder scene with almost 30 bodies! What happened?! Where are they?!"

"Cass? Are you ok? Maybe you should get some rest and we can reconvene tomorrow at a café or something? You know, the one by my place that I really like." I stare at my empty room, save for my bed. Maybe I… dreamed it? Kassandra would've let me know if something was off. She's been quiet recently. Eerily quiet. What is happening to me?

Tonight-5

After Aion vanishes, I faceplant into my bed for some rest. Although I'm improving with total time control, it's still exhausting and I'm an insomniac on top of it. Perhaps I was dreaming. Perhaps I was awake.

Kassandra never said a thing during the whole process. I know we don't have some sort of agreement or anything, but we usually talk. The real issue was Aion showing up and ruining everything for me. What happened in that single moment before I could get a glimpse of the suspect? Reality shattered around me. I lay silent in this shell of a body. It's fascinating how it's completely self-sufficient and full of power, yet my consciousness overrides all of that. Interesting that there was no safeguard for events that break reality like earlier. Is that to help me? To keep me feeling human? I wonder…

I gaze at three strange women but the one that catches my eye looks like me. I can feel it. I feel like a stranger and yet still myself. She stares back at me. With my uniform still on, I pull a knife from my thigh holster with my left hand and erupt in maniacal laughter. It bolsters across the room in an echo as I take off, beginning my slaughter. I swing my my knife at everyone in my path. My only goal is to kill as many as I can. I hear sounds of disapproval and fear, it's blissful. I run and run through the halls of building I was in, as if I had been in it before.

Some sort of disciplinary force arrives to take care of me. Unfortunately, they only provide to be fodder as I slay them as simply as everyone else. All it takes is a single slash, deep into their chests. I killed indiscriminately and instantly. It's queer, the girl who caught my attention earlier was no where to be found, almost as if she was letting me get away with it. I'm able to do this with little interruption and I take pleasure in that fact. At some point my knife broke inside one of my victims.

Strange as I didn't think my knives could break but I switched to my hands, my nails, to continue my killing. Why I continue, I don't know. My hands look like talons, my nails extra sharp, bizarrely sharp. They rip into the throats of my victims, easily allowing my spree to continue. My strikes pierce cleanly into the flesh, tearing open the skin of their bodies and digging into their warm, stringy insides. I don't know why I did it. Why I continued to do it. Only that I felt I had to do it.

Somehow someway, I wake up. A typical sight for me. I'm staring up at the ceiling in the empty lab again. When did I return here? I thought I crashed into my bed at home. This past day has become so stressful. My head hurts, it's like my skull is being split in two. I lay up and look around the room. Nobody here. As usual, I'm leaving the treatment pod with more questions than answers. Hopefully Chrono can relieve some of the problems I had yesterday. He's had ample time to look over the data. I exit the lab and cross into the AI chamber. Hopefully this thing is doing its job too.

"Chrono!" I shout into the echoing chamber, hoping to see the door on the other side open itself up. And sure enough, it does. He puts his arm up on the frame, trying to look cool and waves at me.

"Good. You're up Cass. There are some pressing things we need to go over but first; would you like a drink or some food?" I nod and follow him into the digital archiving room. Chrono goes ahead of me, pulling out some supplies from a box on one of the tables in the room.

"Here. Water and a nutrient pill. Normally I don't keep these on hand but since you've been here lately I thought it'd be a good idea." Chrono says. I raise a curious eyebrow at him. "Haha, ok. The other reason they're here is because there's no staff available to cook. I also can't cook. Sorry but it'll have to do. Oh, make sure you drink the water first." He hands them to me. I take a swig of the water.

"Thanks. Wait, why do I need to drink the water first? And why does my mechanical body even need this? Shouldn't the system automatically adjust things for me?" I reply.

"It's more for your brain, to keep things, normalish for you."

“But if this pill is a replacement for food, and I’m not actually eating food then what’s the point?”

“Like I said, it’s for your brain.” It makes no sense but if he says so. I reluctantly take another drink of water with the pill. Chrono goes back to his computer and pulls up my investigation recordings. There’s are various video, audio, and energy files up that I had streamed directly to the archive. So it was real…

“As you presumed on site, there is a connection between all the murder victims. The deaths of the police. politicians and their staff, they’re all connected to the Aum Shinrikyo cult case.” He says. It’s good to know I got at least something done on my own.

“So someone is working on the cult’s behalf?” I ask.

“That, I’m not sure of yet. As you were aware, you couldn’t identify the face of the female suspect nor the monster she seemingly was cooperating with. All we can confirm is that there were two entities that showed up at this party and only one visibly escaped.”

“What? One escaped? How?” I’m bewildered by the information. Did I see one of the suspects leave? The man who left the room died. The monster that killed him returned to the room. The woman in the kimono. She must have left right after dressing back up.

“See, this is the benefit of the cyber body. Although, in your personal memories I’m sure you can only recall Aion showing up. I could feel her presence too. The body however, kept recording.” He says.

“Then did you see her? I was trying to look at the woman in the private room.”

“In a way, Aion stopped you from doing that.”

“Forget Aion. What about this woman? And the monster?” Chrono hides a laugh under his breath and switches to a pair of photos he had loaded up. Both of their faces are warped into vortexes.

“As you know, you couldn’t confirm their identity during the investigation. Unfortunately, neither did my computers. However, we did get the entire scene covered. This girl gets dressed up, carefully avoids touching anything else in the scene and makes her way to the roof.”

“How did she get up there?”

“Took the stairwell.” He replies. Great minds think alike I suppose.

“She didn’t touch any doorknobs or leave behind fingerprints on anything earlier?”

“No, it appears she doesn’t have any form of biometrics to record. No prints, no hair, no skin, nothing. Outside of the killings, the scene is immaculate. No evidence of anything seen, heard or done, nothing. That’s why I had you go, to cheat a bit.”

“So why couldn’t I, we, see their faces? The system didn’t even pick it up. Why didn’t the system pick it up?”

“Ah well, I don’t have a definitive answer to that right now. I could figure a guess that it’s something similar to the ancient magic AO and Nyarlathotep use.”

“They’re hiding their faces with WHAT?” I can't believe what I'm hearing right now. Another one?! How?

“Their hidden faces remind me of abilities we’ve encountered before. AO’s gaze and Nyarlathotep being able to swap their face at convenience.” Everything that’s coming out of his mouth sounds so ridiculous. So we can’t see their faces at all. We just have to guess based on conjecture?

“How does it work? Can the AI determine that? Check if it’s like Nyarlathotep’s abilities? Could you reverse the effect to get a face to show up?” I ask. Chrono sighs and turns his focus to the computer.

“I’m running the data. As for reversing it, I’m not sure. Give me some time, ok?”

“This is annoying. We have the footage. What’s the problem?”

“I know, sorry. I’ve been working on it since my team returned you. I’ll be working on it when you leave. I’d appreciate if you could ask Kassandra for help again.” Chrono says to my dismay. His team returned me? What about Aion? I saw her in my room. We were in my room? This is a mess. Where does it end? Where did it begin?

“When I leave? You want me to return to the scene? What else should I do. On top of that, Kassandra has been very, silent lately. I don’t know what’s up with that.”

“Hmm interesting… Well as for the scene yes you will, but not yet. I need you to do a couple things for me. This is a little odd of me to ask but I need you to do something for me. I had arranged a time to meet with Aion but with this I can no longer make it. Would you go on my behalf? Tell Aion I’m sorry. As much as we need to discuss something of mighty importance to us, I need more time to review your recordings. I’ll dig into this and contact you when I discover something.” I take a deep, deep breath and sigh. There’s so much going on right now. Why the hell did Aion show up here to look for me? She knows I wasn’t at the lab or the archive. She knows I stopped time in Tokyo. All of these things are making my work so much harder than it needs to be. I punch the desk next to me out of frustration and step into the centre of the room to return home.

“Yeah, it’s fine. I’ll tell her. What’s this mighty thing you need to discuss with her? Why can’t you tell me?”

“I don’t want you stretching your focus across multiple events. I will handle things with Aion later. Just let her know Plan S is going to begin.” He replies. Plan S? I’m not capable of handling multiple things? Whatever.

“Right… well… she invited me too… Just send me back.” Chrono nods and switches to another computer.

“Now the second thing I need you to do is to meet up with the head of my team there in Tokyo.” He says.

"You have a whole team there?" I reply.

"Didn't some of the team members approach you when you arrived? Well, I need you to meet with my team lead, Cassidy. He's usually my ears and eyes down there but well, you know why you're assisting this time around. He's like my Cassandra, hahah. Give him this disk, it's full of relevant data for the case. He'll take care of it." My equivalent? My equal? The loser guy from… No way?! Him?! He hands me the optical disc. Everything is stored on this thing for Cassidy.

"What do you mean by that Chrono? He's like me? That wet noodle looking guy from the alternate universe?"

"He's my head of operations there. Didn't Aion put you in a team? You're her head of operations." Chrono responds. That didn't really answer my question…

"Am I? Most of the time Aion either sent me to do something or, if it was big enough, did it herself. I suppose we did have a team in Leng, although I didn't find out until later. Apparently all they really did was take care of our paperwork though."

"Well for now, meet with Cassidy. I'm sending you back to the morning of the investigation. That means you can't visit the scene until the past you finishes investigating it. At any point after your investigation finishes you can return and ask to speak with him. No time paradoxes. I'm sure you know when Aion will be ready so visit Cassidy after seeing her, understood? I'll be in contact if anything new develops." He begins setting up the reverse summoning process. My mind is heavy. My chest is heavy. I'm being dragged down by myself.

I open my eyes and stare at the wall of my room. It is very plain here. I rush out and into the bathroom, stripping off my clothes to hop into the shower until I stare at the mirror and realise I don't have any reason to shower. I don't get dirty now. Staring at my right hand, I flip it over to the palm and watch it open and close. Right. Well no need to dally here then. I grab a change of clothes and some cash then speed out the door. Aion's place is far away from mine, she lives out in Shibuya.

I'll need to hop on the train to get there. I remember the cafe by her place. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if the café is her place at this point. The road I travel down is full of restaurants, bars and convenience stores. The scent of cooked meat is heavy in the air already. It smells heavenly. Chrono gave me that pill because I don't need to eat but I can feel my mouth salivate.

I go underground to catch the train at the Shinjuku Sanchome station. A short ride brings me to Shinjuku Station, and I get off to switch to the JR line to get to Shibuya. After arriving in Shibuya I sneak my way through the busy morning crowds. This station is always so full, and the crowd outside is twice the size because of all the people who want to see Hachiko, the eternally loyal dog's statue. Oh well, everyone loves dogs, can't be too upset at them wanting to see it. I make my way into Shibuya Crossing and travel further beyond the initial tourist trap area into the more proper city area. Deep into the endless streets of wealthy neighbourhoods, I approach the café Aion asked me to go to. She's already here. I know it. I'm only going through with this to pass on Chrono's message. It's just business.

I enter and point towards the table where my "friend" is, and the waitress walks me over. I sluggishly make my way to the table. Even if I got a bit of rest last night, it didn't help. My brain is completely scrambled. I didn't prepare much of an outfit either, ran out of my apartment so quickly. It's basically my work outfit with a different jacket. I pull up to the table with a yawn. Aion waves at me. I return it with a half-hearted wave and partial smile. Someone is sitting across from her. Did she invite someone else?

"Goodness Cass, did you just get discharged from the ICU? You look like you're dying. Maybe they need to readmit you." She says so nonchalantly, throwing up a peace sign. Just going to ignore that.

"Hey, Aion. I've got a message from Chrono for you."

"Oh yeah? What is it?" She replies.

“He said he’s sorry he can’t make it. He’s tied up with work right now. Something about starting Plan S…” I get to the table and chance to stare at the mystery woman. To my absolute shock, the girl I helped the other night is right here! Next to AION!? HERE?! I take an exceptionally deep breath. You’re ok Cass. It’s ok. There’s a perfectly normal reason for this I’m sure. It’s ok, it’s fine.

“Oh he can’t? That’s a shame. I don’t quite want to go back yet but we do need to discuss that.” I keep my gaze trained on the girl. I must look like a lion eyeing its next meal in the savanna, but I don’t care. What on earth is going on? Try to be mature about it Cass. It’s fine! You delivered the message your job here is done.

“Right well, if that’s all I’ll see you later.” I wave goodbye and I immediately turn away, hoping that I don’t have to survive any longer in this anxiety inducing situation.

“Cass?” Aion calls out my name. Ugh. Do I wait and hear her out or do I just ignore it and move on? Or does that make me look unnecessarily bad? What if she doesn’t want to meet again after this? What if she hates me because of how I behave here?

“Let me introduce you, this is Junko. She’s a good friend of mine.” She grabs the other woman’s hand and smiles at her. A soft giggle follows the smile. A soft giggle is returned for the gesture.

This evil, twisted, backstabbing, lying, manipulative, two faced, unfaithful, horrid, monstrous, deceitful, inconsiderate, horrible, cruel, unreliable, nasty, impolite lesbian bitch! Right in front of me? What the FUCK? This isn’t real. I refuse to believe that this is real. If this were real then surely a God would show up to stop this from happening right before my eyes. How could she do this to me? I should’ve never come out to deliver this message. What was Chrono thinking? I was doing fine. I was out on my own time, enjoying my solitude and growing as a person. That’s right. Nobody can hurt me if I’m alone. Just me watching out for me. That’s what’s been working.

This actually doesn’t bother me at all. Although, if I could go back and tell him no I would. I could focus more on my work and complete it. Why am I stuck feeling like this? Did I do something

wrong? Did I hurt her? Surely I have been nothing but helpful lately? Why would she do this to me? I don't understand. I don't WANT to understand.

"Thank you, for your hospitality the other night, Ms…" That same voice from the other night reintroduces itself to my ears. I just stare at her, I can't think straight. There's so much information rushing through my head right now. I wonder how I look? Like a sweaty, shaky mess? No wait, like Death apparently. Why does the mechanical body not make me look like I'm alright? I should look fine. I'm fine. I'm actually fine. It's fine.

"Cass?" Aion's deceitful voice pierces my ear drums and robs me from my thoughts.

"Oh, right sorry. Ahem, I'm Cassandra Watson, friend of Aion here." Aion erupts with laughter.

"It's just friend of Aion now? Surely there's something more impressive to your name now than that detective?" The sound of metal dropping into glass further adds to the noisy atmosphere the formerly tranquil café held. That Junko girl seems to have been caught off guard by what Aion said. Why is that? No, this is good. Get her to talk, that was a strange reaction. This girl has been nothing but the definition of strange!

"Oh well, you know Aion. I'm just so up to my knees with work that nothing other than your friend would be something to boast about at the moment."

"Please Cass, what a ridiculous answer! Why would someone ever be proud of that? Junko, tell me I'm not crazy. That's a ridiculous answer right?" The other girl shifts in place a little, picking her spoon back up and carves out another sweet bite for herself.

"It's certainly odd. A detective would most definitely have things to be proud about. For instance, helping a poor defenceless girl who was out in the rain?" Junko speaks which gets Aion to stare at her. Aion then turns her face towards me with an awfully distasteful grin on her face. I don't like it.

"Oh! Cass! You're the one who helped Junko! Wonderful! You are always looking out for others. A real heart of gold this one has." The tone of her voice is ripe with disdain and swagger, why is she

speaking like that to me. You know what, I don't have time for this right now. I need to meet Chrono's team leader. Hmm, it's only 13:37 though. I suppose if I walk all the way over I'll be there at a non-conflicting time. I'll do that, I'm not in the right place mentally right now to deal with this.

"I just do what I do, nothing more. Well if that's all, I'll be going now." I reply.

"Yeah, yeah. Go make your delivery, errand girl." She waves her hand at me, and I turn to leave. God what is her problem? I would've preferred being spared the pain by having things like this spoken behind my back.

Today/3

"Someone new entered the building Junko, I don't recognise them." Within my mind rings Lady Yi's voice. Someone is encroaching on our territory?

"The police?"

"No. Some girl walked in ignoring everyone and is climbing the stairs. I won't make it back before she gets to our floor, assuming that's her goal." A third party is going to search the scene, why else would she be avoiding contact with anyone there?

"Scare her away like you do everyone else, My Lady."

"She's immune to my whispers Junko. Or at least the ones my shadows speak. This is why I've brought this up." Immune to Lady Yi's whispers? Someone interesting has arrived.

"What do you mean immune? I thought humans weren't immune. Does that mean she's not human then?"

"Perhaps she's a robot."

"Robots don't exist. This is a girl not a Gundam nor a mecha. You've been watching too much television."

"I find it more enjoyable to imagine her in a more fun way Junko. Why don't you?" I move out to the edge of the sidewalk to stop and think. It's not that I don't want to be imaginative, I just don't want to be caught.

"Sorry, I'm trying to think of who this mystery person could. We've come this far, to have something like this happen so late into the game is not ideal."

"I'll take care of it; I have a way with words you know. I'll trick her out of there like everyone else."

"No, Lady Yi wait. I want you to get information out of her too. Find out who she is and who

sent her." I need to cover our bases.

"Should I... give her a lick and bring her back with me?"

"If you can make her useful then do whatever you want." Truthfully, we don't need any last minute variables ruining things for us. My Lady should just kill her and be done with it.

"Of course. I'm almost at the building so I'll be making my way up for a more up close and personal visit. Bye Junko!" Her tone is a bit too cheery for my liking. Although I don't quite mind the antics, I wish she didn't need to go to other girls for sex. I should be more than enough.

I resume walking to the café. I suppose I'm guilty as well. Meeting Aion again for a little side action. Although I guess it's not really action, she's just someone to talk to. It's nice. I'll have a public appearance as an alibi, my Lady is taking care of the rest. Everything will point to those cult psychos doing their crazy stuff and we'll avoid the heat. It's a two in one really. I set the cult up and kill the people most likely to investigate the cult. They'll be chasing each other's tails for years. All the while I can send a steady stream of humans to My Lady with little interference.

I stare at the high-rise buildings that hide most of the sky from my vision. Aion lives in a nice area but it's such a long walk to get here. These places she frequents are the best of the best. She has money but I have no idea where she works. She's not Japanese but she knows her way around like she's been here her whole life. She's the most open, private person I've ever met. I hope at the very least, she hasn't been working for the government or something this whole time. I don't want to have to kill her one day.

The streets start to thin out. Less and less eyes about. I'm near the cafe. A lost soul finding her way back to the light. Maybe today I'll ask her a bit about herself. We've been friends for a bit now. I wonder if I'll run into her staff again. The driver boy that she swears isn't her brother but looks just like her. Although with how she spoke to him, I wouldn't be surprised if he quit and took off. Such a haughty personality but, it's fun to be around her. Everybody stares at her when she enters a

room. She just has that kind of demeanour. She repeatedly shoots down any and all attempts by men who want to buy her drinks or try to get her out to the batting cages. But she invites me to tea and cake once a week. Does that make me lucky? I should let Aion know I'm nearby. I reach into my purse and grab my cellphone to send her a message.

"4649." There, that should grab her attention. I put my cellphone back into my bag.

Suddenly my attention is taken by My Lady once more.

"Junko, this girl is fascinating! She is immune to my whispers in person too! She teleports around the rooms! And…" I feel like I'm the silly one for not having an outlandish guess like robot.

"What does this mean, my Lady? You can't trick her out of there?"

"Just give me some time. I've never met someone with a mind I couldn't crack."

"Will it be long?"

"Long? Maybe. I can't give away my presence, I'm sticking to the shadows. If need be, I'll project a dream onto the environment to trick her." A dream for the environment, not for a person. Interesting, that could work.

"Is it possible to feed her fake information like that. Will others notice?"

"Only if they enter the floor. Now that I think about it, a projection would've been easier to keep the scene hidden." That's something I didn't want to hear. It's fine though. We've never been caught. This girl isn't going to be the first.

"Do your best, My Lady. What do we do if it doesn't work though?"

"Junko, I have survived thousands of years by tricking humans. I will not be caught here."

"Thank you, My Lady. I will leave it to you."

"Bye bye!" Silence in my mind once again. A girl that's immune to Lady Yi's own whispers. I wonder if it's ever happened before but as usual, she didn't seem to be bothered by it. In fact, she sounded excited because of it. I look up the block and see Aion leaning against the café wall. I pat

myself down and take a couple breaths to chill out. My Lady is never wrong. She'll be fine. I should enjoy my midday excursion.

Aion waves her hand at me and I pick up my pace to meet her, waving back. I'm excited to see her. No different than my lady being excited to interact with her girl. Aion kicks her foot off of the wall and meets me halfway.

"Hey, what's up?" She says to me with her cool, smooth voice. She looks fantastic. A double trench coat jacket, black turtleneck sweater and a pair of blue jeans leading down to some fantastic looking boots. I feel a little undressed and quite overwhelmed.

"Oh, not much. What's up with you?" I try to cooly reply back.

"Hey, I ran into an old friend yesterday. We had a little chat. I asked him to stop by. Do you mind?"

"Oh? No, not at all. He's more than welcome to eat cake, sip tea and gossip the afternoon away."

"Cool. I have a feeling he won't stick around for long but let's go inside and get a table." Aion strides in front of me and enters the café. Not like they don't already have a table waiting for you Aion! I enter behind her and hand my jacket to the waitstaff employee. He takes both of our coats and fits them on to a coatrack near the door. He seats us at a booth in the centre of the café. It's a very western looking café. Lots of dark hardwood and lantern-like lights set on the edges of the upper parts of the booths. It's a cozy atmosphere.

We take seats opposite each other and after a few moments a waiter comes up to us with a couple of menus and two cups of water. He looks more like a butler than a waiter. Aion really likes these kinds of places. I think she enjoys the feeling of being served by others. We each grab our own menu and open them up, scouring the text for what we shall delight in today. The waters are set down next to us while we read.

"Ladies, are you ready to order?" I look up at the waiter and then to Aion.

“I’m ready.” She speaks up. “I’ll have the strawberry pancakes, a side of fresh fruit, a buttered croissant, a boiled egg, a couple of slices of toast, Japanese style sponge cake, a blueberry ice cream parfait, and an iced cherry blossom latte.” Aion shuts her menu, staring at me. The pressure is on.

“Oh, I’ll have the French toast and a tapioca milk tea.” I give the waiter my order. I close my menu and grab Aion’s, putting them together and setting them down for the waiter.

“Of course. It will be just a moment then.” The waiter takes the menus from us, bows, then walks away to give the order to the kitchen staff. Aion nudges me with her boot and begins to speak.

“So, how was your day? Anything new going on?”

“Oh not much going on lately. It’s that new year’s stretch, everything closes and tv gets boring. Time to rest and recover you know?” I reply.

“Yeah. I’ve been catching up on some books, some manga. Was thinking about getting a computer, it looks like it’d be cool to have.” My ears perk up at the information. I could help with that! I have a computer!

“Oh a computer? Well I have one at my place. Computers are pretty interesting things.”

“Interesting how?” Aion takes a sip from her water, I move to take a sip as well. I guess I was mimicking her because I don’t really know how to describe it. How do I put it into words…?

“Well it’s like, you click on these images displayed on your monitor. They open up different types of software where you can do things like write. Oh, you can put CDs into the CD rom drive to open specific types of software or to play video games. Well, only for certain games made for computers. You can also access this thing called the internet and look at lots of different things although you need to know the address of what you wanted to visit. Not like a street address, how do I explain it… Oh, there are also chatrooms where you can talk to people from anywhere. It’s not an actual room but a virtual one. It’s really neat.”

“That all sounds interesting! Maybe I’ll look more seriously into a computer now with your

recommendation."

"Oh, you know what? If you'd like, after this we could go to my place. You can use my computer and see how it all works."

"That would be great. Let's do that then Junko." The waiter returns with bountiful amounts of plates for our food and a tray of cups of our drinks. It all smells so delicious. He meticulously lays it all out before us and then spreads the silverware out for it. She's so excited about sharing this computer of hers. It's so old to the ones I use the thing might as well be a new device.

"Do you like eating food the western way? With forks and all that?" Aion asks.

"Oh, I don't really mind using it. It can be convenient." I grab a spoon to dig into my French toast.

"My guest will be arriving soon." I look up at Aion as I finish chewing my first bite of food.

"Who is it… if you don't mind me asking?"

"Someone I used to work with. But I don't really want to talk to him and he doesn't really want to talk to me. So he's going to send someone else to do it for him. His message is going to be that he's sorry he can't make it." She slouches in the booth and lets her head fall to the side. What a mood shift. Aion stands up and waves her hand at me.

"Sorry, if you'll excuse me for a moment. I've to use to the restroom." I nod at her and return my focus to my toast. I wasn't so much focusing on my toast as I was zoning out. Just kind of existing at that moment in time. Such a surreal feeling. Aion returns. That was quick! Maybe she just felt the need to fix her hair or makeup. Or perhaps she just wanted to wash her hands.

We continue eating and before I know it, the bell on the door chimes. Someone enters the café. The distant small talk turns into not-so-distant footsteps and finally Aion waves her hand at someone.

"Yo, Cass, what's up?" Aion says nonchalantly, throwing up a peace sign.

"Hey, Aion. I've got a message from Chrono for you."

"Oh yeah? What is it?"

"He said he's sorry he can't make it. He's tied up with work right now. Something about starting Plan S…" I turn around to get a glimpse of the mystery woman. No way. Is this real? The girl that helped me the other night?! She's the one here for AION!? HERE?! I take an exceptionally deep breath. Although this revelation disturbs me, it's of no consequence. But what did she come here for? Aion was already aware… How odd. What's going on?

"Oh he can't? That's a shame. I don't quite want to go back yet but I also need to see him." My eyes are focused on Aion. Perhaps I look a little out of place here. I never imagined that I would see this stranger again. What on earth is going on?!

"Right well, if that's all I'll see you later." I keep hidden away, hoping that I don't have to survive any longer in this anxiety inducing situation.

"Cass?" Aion calls her name. I had just noticed; I didn't learn her name. Cass huh… "Let me introduce you, this is Junko. She's a good friend of mine." She grabs my hand and smiles at me. A soft giggle follows her smile. I return the soft giggle for the gesture.

Junko, it's me again. Our little invader has quite the secret!

Lady Yi?! Right now? I'm a little preoccupied at the moment. Could you wait a bit?

Oh am I interrupting your date? Are you two fucking right now?

M-My Lady!? Of course not!

Hehe. Junko, our invader has quite the mental barrier. A wall of chaos and disunity swirls around her brain like a turbulent storm. I could only peek inside for a moment but what I saw will guarantee our victory!

What? Really? Tell me everything!

This girl is connected to your date, Aion. She has a large place in the girl's heart.

Aion? She loves Aion?

What it is, I don't know. All I see is Aion. The centre of her world.

Do the whispers remain ineffective?

Indeed they do. The dream projection, however, has already tricked her! The room is now empty, there is no evidence of a crime. She was just standing there; I assume bewildered by what she had just experienced.

Lady Yi, give me a description. I will search for her after my time here ends.

A foreign girl, white hair with black colouring at the ends of her hair. She's wearing something like a suit, white dress shirt, black jacket on top. A pretty big pair of tits on her. She's a looker.

It dawns on me that My Lady's description matches the girl who is speaking to Aion. It's all falling into place now. It makes sense, she mentioned she was some sort of authority figure. What great timing. This girl is the one looking into us. But what is her link to Aion. Love? She works on behalf of the one Aion was originally going to meet with right? Does that mean Aion knows about our crime? No, don't be hasty. Let Lady Yi take care of it. I will simply relay to her what I've discovered.

Lady Yi, the girl you have described to me is next to me right now.

Is that right? She just vanished from here! I wondered how she did it and where she went. One part of that mystery has been solved then.

What should I do?

I will come and finish her off. Do whatever you can to delay her. I will lay a projection over this entire city to trick her. I will teach her that there are some wounds time can not heal! Keh heh heh!

Of course.

"Thank you, for your hospitality the other night, Ms…" I just stare at her; I can't think straight. There's so much information rushing through my head right now. I wonder how I look? Like a

sweaty, shaky mess? No, My Lady has trained me well. Even if my lips are still discoloured, I should look fine. I'm fine. I'm actually fine. It's fine.

"Cass?" That seemingly deceitful voice pierces my ear drums and robs me from my thoughts. Aion, what are you up to?

"Oh, sorry. Ahem, I'm Cassandra Watson, friend of Aion here." Aion erupts with laughter. I keep my focus on her. Cassandra Watson. The one who seeks to ruin our work. I slowly learn more and more about her. Exactly what My Lady wants.

"It's just "friend of Aion," now? Surely there's something more impressive to your name now than that detective?" I accidentally drop my spoon, the sound of metal dropping into glass further adds to the noisy atmosphere the formerly tranquil café held. That Cass girl seems to have been caught off guard by that. She's staring intently on me. Why is that? No, this is good. Get her to talk, that was a strange reaction. This girl has been nothing but the definition of strange!

"Oh well, you know Aion. I'm just so up to my knees with work that nothing other than your friend would be something to boast about at the moment." She says. Detective! She must be here for us!

"Please Cass, what a ridiculous answer! Why would someone ever be proud of that? Junko, tell me I'm not crazy. That's a ridiculous answer, right?" The other girl shifts in place a little, perhaps she's getting uncomfortable. I pick my spoon back up and carve out another sweet bite to eat.

"It's certainly odd. A detective would most definitely have things to be proud about. For instance, helping a poor defenceless girl who was out in the rain?" Aion shifts to stare at her. Then she turns her face towards me with an awfully distasteful grin on it. I don't like it.

"Oh! Cass! You're the one who helped Junko! Well isn't that nice of you! You are always looking out for others. A real heart of gold this one has." The tone of her voice is ripe with disdain and swagger, why is she speaking like that to her. Seems that Cass didn't like it either. I can see her feet

move and I turn my head towards her. She turns around and waves her hand at us.

"I just do what I do, nothing more. Well if that's all, I'll be going now."

"Yeah, yeah. Go run your errands, errand girl." She waves her hand at her and exits the building. God what is her problem?

"Sorry Junko, I didn't mean for that to happen. I must've put you in an awkward position."

"No, not at all. Things like that happen right?"

"Right. Well, hopefully the person I need to talk to will properly show up next time and not send someone else to do his work." Aion laughs under her breath; I wonder what she finds funny about that.

"That girl, Cassandra was it? She's a detective?"

"Yeah."

"And she talks to you like that, even though you mentioned being her boss?"

"Ah, yeah. Yeah she does huh."

"Her eyes looked so sad." I return to my plate, finishing the toast and my drink. I'd like to stay longer but that visit just soured the whole experience. I have a bad feeling about all of this. I should return home and wait for My Lady.

"Aion, if it's alright with you, I'll be leaving first." Aion nods her head, her mouth full of food.

"Yeash of coursh. Shee you later!" She says with her mouth full anyways. What a goof. I bow my head to her and carry myself out of the restaurant. Cassandra Watson must be long gone. Apparently she can just vanish and teleport at will. What is she? Someone like My Lady? Well no matter, I can't do anything about it yet. I just need to wait for further instruction.

Live In Japan

"Cassandra Watson? I'm… heh… This is an odd one. I knew you were comin' but to see ya in person is well… Sorry, I'm already ramblin' an we just met. I'm Cassidy, Cassidy Watson. No direct relation. You can just call me Cassidy. Don't want no confusion on either of our ends. Chrono has filled me in on what you've done and what you are here to do." He extends his hand out for a shake. This is that guy from… What the fuck? This guy? That loser? The weirdo from the other universe? Chrono hid him here the whole time? It's fine. Whatever.

I confidently grab his hand and put pressure into the shake, hoping to show I'm not anybody's errand girl. He looks younger than I thought he'd be, maybe a aged a few years since I last saw him. Or well, not the last time… the…Whatever! How he appeared last time! I can at least see him in person now. His eyes are almond shaped and his neatly combed hair is reminiscent of the ink that shines in my many old world books. He doesn't look it at a glance but underneath his fancy, fitted suit, I can tell his limbs are like those of weeping willows. He has a more, I'm the boss air about him. He's fairly handsome I guess…

"Yes, that's me. Cassandra Watson, Defective-" Oh no… I cough into my shoulder and look away. "Detective Extraordinaire… You can just call me Cass. It's what everyone calls me." I reach into my coat pocket and pull out the disk Chrono wanted me to deliver.

"Chrono entrusted this to me for you. He said it's full of relevant data for you to go over."

He takes it out of my hand and waves someone over to him. He hands it to them and they rush back over to one of the computers they have set up on the first floor of the murder building.

"I'm afraid it may no longer be relevant. As you are the only one to fully experience the scene Cass, that data is only relevant to you." I tilt my head in confusion. Partly from what he meant.

Partly by his sudden shift in spoken register.

“What do you mean by that Cassidy? I don’t follow.”

“We gained access to the room at 14:49, mere minutes ago.”

“What? That’s good right? You guys can conduct your investigation!”

“Were it that simple Cass. It seems to be an accident. Someone had taken the elevator up to the 45th floor. I don’t know why and the person who did it doesn’t even remember. Allow me to catch you up to speed, we had received a call from the room by an unknown third party. I had two teams head up immediately after the call and shortly after, I joined them. One team went by stairwell, the other elevator. Both entered and that’s when we realised something very wrong was going on.” The sound of steps crashing into the ground comes from behind us. I turn to take a look at what it is. The guy who had taken the disc from Cassidy returns; an excited look sits on his face.

“Sir, excuse my interruption.” The man says.

“What is it?” Cassidy replies.

“We have extracted the data. It’s as you said.” Cassidy starts taking steps towards the computers. He stops for a moment and tilts his head in the direction of them to me.

“Wonderful. Please Cass, you’re the only one who’ll be able to help us.” I can’t believe what I just heard. Cassidy’s inviting me over. I know he’s inviting me over. It’s a nice feeling to be wanted for a change. We make our way to the computers together and stare at the video replay of my investigation.

“As I imagined, your investigation is a world apart from ours Cass.” I stare at the doll-like bodies lying lifelessly in the room on the CRT monitor. I don’t understand what he means.

“Cassidy, please continue your explanation. What was wrong with the rooms on the 45th floor?” He keeps his sight on the screen. He doesn’t look outwardly disgusted, but I can tell he’s not comfortable with what he’s seeing either.

“We decided to enter simultaneously, hoping that with this many people entering, whatever force was turning us away wouldn’t be able to overwhelm us all. We barged through the door and into the area proper. We pushed into the depths of it, no caller, no corpses, no evidence. We found our caller unconscious in one of the side rooms of the suite.”

“Empty?! How?”

“Not just empty. Flawless. Nary a speck of dust outta place. Not a single trace of a struggle. It is as if the event never occurred. Now, how does this compare to your recordin’ on our screen Cass?” I turn my attention away from the monitor and stare at Cassidy. His brow is raised in a perplexed look.

“How is it that we possess information that currently exists while simultaneously not true? Your footage is from earlier today, correct?”

“Yes, that is correct.”

“Hmm, then it seems we have a bit of a contradiction now don’t we?” He crosses his arms and returns to focus to the monitor.

“I’m going to go give the floor another sweep. How could everything just vanish?” I look over to the elevator. I didn’t take it last time. What’s going on here? Why am I the one sent to work on this? Something is off about all of this. He should be able to manage just fine. Why doesn’t he just use his time powers and fix things?

“By all means, maybe you’ll discover where all of our evidence vanished off to. I would like to go over your recording a few more times, as well as take a look at the rest of the data. This will give us both time to think and we can reconvene when you finish your investigation.” He nods his head at me then turns away. I nod in return and head towards the elevator. I call it and take it up to the 45th floor. Leaning my back into the far side of the elevator, I think about what Cassidy said.

“Information that currently exists while simultaneously not true. How did this happen… A

paradox…" The elevator doors slide open. This way is a lot easier to enter. At a base glance, the area ahead looks similar. I look down at the floor ahead from the conference room, there is a distinct lack of discolouration on the floor. Pressing forward through the big centre doors, opening them creates yet another mystery. The bodies are all missing! There's no sense of struggle in the room. No blood at all. The tables are empty. I walk over to the side room, open the door and stare at another empty shell. The bed is without disturbance. There's no drug paraphernalia on the table. Well, this is all part of the reason why I'm here right? I extend my left hand and snap my fingers, how about twenty-four hours. What happened in here? Why did the scene change?

As time rolls backward, the room remarkably remains the same. Nobody enters. Nobody shows up. This area is completely untouched. I can't fathom why it's so different right now. What a headache. Now I have two histories that coexist. One with the murders and one where they never happens. Is that why Aion is here? What is going on?

I spend the rest of my time carefully examining different parts of the rooms. Tables, chairs, the desk, the bed. All of them are perfect. Nothing is out of the ordinary. Or rather, everything is out of the ordinary now. This happened right under my nose. How? Aion interrupted my investigation. Chrono woke me up in the lab and sent me back home. I met with Aion, and now I'm back here. This all happened in two days. Chrono would've called if something changed in the timeline. And the most odd part of all this is Aion. Why did Aion show up right before I saw the killers face? Why was Aion at the café with that stranger? Are they linked? They have to be. If that's not a divine signal from a God I don't know what is.

I exit the conference room and make my way back to the elevator. How do I proceed from here? Maybe Cassidy can have some of his men secretly watch that girl Aion was with. I didn't feel anything off about her but it's too weird to not be coincidence. Plus, Chrono needs to do something about Aion. He should've been the one to see her not me. I call the elevator to go back down. I press

my back on the far end of the sinking chamber and stare at the door the entire ride back down. The elevator beep wakes me up. I head over to Cassidy and his team. He waves a couple of his team members away and approaches me.

"Ah, Cass you've returned. How was it?"

"It's like you described. There isn't a single trace of anything up there anymore."

"I see. What does that tell you?"

"Hmm…I'd say our killer is aware someone entered." I reply.

"What do you base that on?" He asks.

"The fact that the room changed after I left. It's far too coincidental."

"Anything else?" He crosses his arms and lets out a deep breath.

"Our killer is either boastful and showing off their skills, or terrified that someone has caught on."

"I agree. Furthermore, we have hard evidence of foul play, in no small part thanks to you. We need only work towards discovering our source of it. I recognise some of those who were murdered in the recording. Politicians and police. I'm sure you saw the link between them as well. They are all related to cases against the Aum Shinrikyo cult."

"Right, I did notice some of the victims as Diet members who took part in legislation against the cult." I reply.

"It's a shame but, we have to press on without them. With members of the government being murdered and now vanishing, there's a total information restriction on every government agency and potential news source in the country. What we learned here is absolutely not allowed to leave the building. If any news of this spreads, it will only serve to cause chaos within society. I cannot allow that to happen Cass. All levels of government already have their hands full with this Y2K hysteria."

“Yeah, I can imagine the panic this could cause. The officials didn’t deserve to die. Certainly not like that. I’ll help as best I can.” I reply. He unfolds his arms and places both of his hands in his pockets, walking towards the exit of the building. I follow his lead.

“We’re running facial scans on the faces of those we couldn’t identify. I expect them to be gang related. Perhaps a mutual understanding of your enemy is my enemy. I however am theorising that, the Aum Shinrikyo is unrelated to this case, Cass.”

“You can scan faces and the computer can find out who that person is? Your computers can do that? And what do you mean unrelated to the case?” I turn to face all of the technology Cassidy’s crew is using. It’s certainly impressive, this looks like it all belongs in a secret lab rather than the base at a crime scene.

“Oh, hah hah, right. You’re from this era so you’re not familiar with this level of technology yet. To briefly explain, scanning faces are one of the features of our systems. It’s not the only way to search for people either. If you have a name you can manually input it and it will bring up a registered ID file of everyone with that name. How these work however, I'm not at liberty to explain.”

“Technology here definitely seems to be from a different level than what should currently available. Is this all from Chrono?”

“Correct. You can ask Chrono about it if you have a desire to learn more. Now, if I may return to the case at hand.” I nod my head and turn my attention back to him, slightly regretful of making him go so off topic.

“Perhaps it’s just my intuition, a gut feeling if you will.” I nod at him again and he continues “This is a little, too on the nose, isn’t it? These murders are exceedingly obvious based on who was targeted. It’s almost a parody of a massacre. The Aum Shinrikyo facility was already raided, their official religious status was revoked, and several of their head members have been arrested.

Although there may be a few embers left in the log, it's long been extinguished."

"What are you thinking then?"

"I think we have a red herring Cass. This organisation is too weak to pull something on this scale. We need to find out what's behind it all. In fact, I have another idea of what might be going on." He clears his throat and walks over to a nearby desk, picking up a folder.

"Every year around this time, revised budgets return to every Japanese agency and ministry in government. I'm going to take a look at anything that looks out of place. Typically, they all get slashed and come back with less funding than requested. If any standout, there may be funding changes under the guise of security." One of the members of his team runs over, handing him another folder. He flips over some of the papers inside, I can see the names of a few agencies like the Justice Ministry, Public Security, and the Police. That's all that I can spy however as he steps towards the door. I follow closely behind until he stops and shuts the folder.

"Alright, I'll leave that to you Cassidy. I'll return to Chrono to see if he's made any progress."

"I fear these murders are far more than political deaths, they're economic as well. Take this folder with you, my team has compiled differences in your data with ours, along with various other things I feel need attention." Cassidy clears his throat and hands me his report.

"I'm glad we have you as our Ace, Cass. I hope you find the gumption you need to solve this one." He smiles at me, then returns over to the others, directing them to work. He's nice… A real good guy. The only person who treats me with respect. He wants to get the job done and I want to help him. I'm helping. I bow farewell to Cassidy and his staff, then leave the building. So much time has passed. I didn't even notice the sun had set. Well, it is winter, setting around 17:00 isn't very unusual. I head home with what feels like a slight smile on my face. It's refreshing being around someone like him.

After getting through the evening hustle and bustle of the city, I finally return. I unwind with a

shower, turn on the television and just stare at it. I don't know why I stare at this thing. There's nothing ever good on. I go into my kitchen, looking for something to cook. I should be careful. I am low on money at the moment. I get some rice started and prepare some miso soup. It's not a luxurious café experience but simple things like this are nice too. After eating I clock out at 21:00 to get some rest. Or I at least like to think I'll get some rest tonight.

But I just lay here, my mind racing. I don't know how long I've been staring at it. How long I kept my eyes shut. How much I had laid in the darkness. How much I tried to sleep. I get up and put my work clothes on back on. I open up the report I was given, reading over the discrepancies between my investigation and Cassidy's. It is odd that initially his team was being turned away from the scene. I'm sure he's the one who let Chrono know. It's even more odd that the scene vanished. Not just for them but for myself as well. The strangest thing here is Aion. Is she trying something bad again? I thought she moved on from things like that. My right hand finds itself across my mouth as I try to think of connections between everything. I haven't done this in awhile but perhaps it's time to create an old fashion paper trail.

I head into the living room, looking for a box of tacks and string that I keep around the tv. I return to my room with both and pin the initial investigation file on the wall in front of my bed. This is the report that states Cassidy and his team know something has occurred but only one person had seen it. Above that report I pin my report that Chrono made for Cassidy. I tie a string between the two report, I link them because I saw the scene myself. Whatever it was that turned others away didn't turn me away. I haven't thought about why it didn't affect me, that's something I should also give attention to later. Here are reports on the budgets of some government agencies. Namely the Justice Ministry, Public Security, the National Police Agency, National Public Safety and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

I'll pin these all to the right side of the main file. As for my own ideas, I need to create links for

Aion and that girl, Junko. I return to my living room to look for some blank sheets of paper and a pen, my stock here isn't as good as my office back in Atlantis. Perhaps I should return there to complete the work. Why am I doing this alone? I'm the least lonely person in the world with this psychopath in my head. Who has been worrying silent for awhile now…

I return to my room with only a pen, I tear the folder in half and write the two names in question on each half. I pin the names to the left of the main file. So normal things on the right, paranormal on the left. Now that I think about it, what agency is Cassidy a part of? If he's connected to Chrono then he has to be outside of normal jurisdiction right? So much was going on I never got a chance to ask. He never said either. Maybe he assumed I was a part of the same one since Chrono sent me. I'll ask next time.

Junko and Aion. Why are they connected? Why was Junko out that night? Was she in the building the night of the murders? Come to think of it, she had her eye covered when I found her. It wasn't covered during her time with Aion at the café. She was bleeding too. Why did Aion stop me during the investigation? I wish I could find the link, it's right there! I just need proof! This is so irritating. Why did she do that to me? I need to clear my head.

It's another late-night walk, I can feel it, crawling over me. Consuming my thoughts. That dream Kassandra showed me… If I find someone, could I? Would I? I'm alone, as usual. Most people aren't out this late and the ones that are out are either homeless or completely drunk. Missed the last train and too plastered to walk back. What a range of emotions I've had these past couple of days. I'm unable to sleep in my own bed, close my eyes, without seeing her.

I hate it. It's so damn frustrating. I can't get it out of my mind. It's cold, so cold. Nobody would notice if one of them went missing at night. The steel sticks its frozen body to my thigh from the holster. My mind eventually wanders to back Aion. Tch, what am I thinking?

Amidst my midnight frenzy, I come across an interesting looking shop. It looks like the logo is

made out of those old vinyl record things. I guess those were pretty popular a few decades ago. Maybe some music will help me think. Walking inside, I stare at the low, neon lit room. An employee from behind the counter approaches me.

"What can I help you find tonight, miss?"

"Give me something loud. Loud and angry."

"You got it miss. Right over here I've got just the thing. An EP from a couple years back. It's angry, out loud and proud." The storekeeper walks over to the other side of the counter and pulls out a vinyl. So these things are still around. I thought CDs and cassettes got rid of them. Well, maybe this is an enthusiast shop. He places it on the counter for me.

" "AGE – Inside Darkness." Pretty hot if you ask me, just don't play it too loud or you'll have complaints from everyone over 40 in Tokyo! ¥2,500." He laughs while I pull out my wallet and set three ¥1,000 bills down into the payment tray. I stare at the giant box these things come in.

"Do you have a phonograph? A record player?" I shake my head left to right. He sets a ¥500 coin down for my change. Aren't those the same thing? Either way, I don't have one.

"We have a couple of cheaper ones near the back, I can show you if you'd like." I stare blankly at the vinyl art for a bit until he taps the record.

"Oh, right, the player. The cheapest one is fine."

"Sure, let me fetch it for you then." He walks off and I can hear the sound of boxes shifting on the floor. I'm really about to blow all my money on this junk, what am I doing?

"That'll be ¥11,200. Be careful carrying this box, it's a little heavy for someone like you." I force the air out of my nose, annoyed at his casually offensive remark. What does he know? I can lift heavy things just fine! I open my wallet back up, ¥20,500 yen left. I pay and leave the shop, carrying my goods back home. Maybe I just need to distract myself from all the shitty shit going on right now. Well, it's not all shitty. Cassidy is a pretty cool dude.

\All the Universe's Darkness

Pulling myself away from the computer screen, I take off my glasses and stretch out into the dark room surrounding me. I rub my eyes and stare into the aisles beyond my monitor, nobody has been around for a while now. Not that we typically get a lot of traffic here. Plus, I caught up on some work by sorting the files on that abduction case that Althea ended up solving. Small thanks to my body snatcher.

The other archivist's have been rather absent as of late. Busy with their own work. Not that I'm upset, I just hang around here anyways. Glancing over at the computer screen, I spy for any remaining tasks. I guess she never showed up today. I hoped she would have at some point today. That interview needs to be in by Saturday night so it can be formatted into the final report. Well, I understand. She's busy. She has her own work to manage, her own life and all that. Perhaps tomorrow she'll be ready to speak with us. I've done enough today anyway. It's finally my turn to clock out for the night.

I feel the rush of ending my shift and jump for joy. I look up at the empty room and halls surrounding me, nobody saw that. Nobody is here other than me. Nobody is ever here anymore. I hate being here. It's not that bad but this is why I told Chrono I want to be out in the field. I want to go out and "live" for a while. I look at the key on my desk next to my computer and grab it. Right, I don't have pockets today so I'm carrying this thing. Unless… I mean… not like anyone has been here for the past few hours… Plus nobody ever comes by this late so maybe I can be a little lazy and leave things unlocked.

What would Chrono say if I were so irresponsibly lazy about closing the archive? He would be

pretty upset if I don't follow the protocol exactly as he laid it out. I still remember the last time someone messed up the archive… I shiver in place as I recall the weeklong humiliation she was put through. I did fan the flames a bit myself thought. Hehe… That was good. It was really fun… I put my glasses back on and start walking to the front of the archive. I keep my eyes shooting from side to side in the various aisles, looking for any late-night stragglers that need to exit. Grand works from wall to wall align the archive, from stories and fluff to much more deviant recordings stored away in a restricted area. Those ones are quite far into the archive, to hide from the general public. Or perhaps to protect the general public from it. Approaching the large wooden doors, I pull the key up and slide it into the metallic keyhole, turning it to the right and locking away the knowledge for the night.

"Haaaaah… Hnnnngggg…"

Huh? Did…did I hear something? The wind squeaks through the cracks of the door perhaps. The first breath of Winter is on its way through. Or maybe it's the final gasp of Autumn. Well it's more than welcome. I'm over the heat. Now I can laze about at my place in Tokyo under my kotatsu. Turning away from the door, I return to my desk. I gaze to the right for a moment, something in my peripheral vision catches my attention. I stop and stare, trying to determine whether or not I actually saw something there. I'm certain I would've noticed someone this late. I walk into the aisle where I think I saw the shadow.

"Hello? I'm afraid the archive is now closed for the night. I can direct you to the exit." As if I'm actually talking to somebody.

I turn the corner and look down the end of the aisle and then turn around again, checking the other way. Empty. The dim, hollow halls of the archive greet me once more as I turn back around and head back to the chamber at large. Closing time. I just need to gather my things and head out of the exit at the back of the facility. Approaching my PC, I see the screen has dimmed. I suppose I was gone long enough for the thing to fall into sleep mode. I pull the drawer underneath the desk open,

setting the main door key back inside, I pick up the key to the back door to lock it next. Letting a gentle sigh out of my breath, I gather my notes and stuff them into my bag. Ideas and doodles from my shift here fill up the latest pages in my notebook. Hopefully I can get some of these out of the notebook and into action someday…

Pulling my bag over my shoulder, it sits at my waist. I slide the key into an outer facing pocket on my bag for easy access. I push my chair into the desk to call it a night. I make my way to the light switches, moments from stealing the warm glow away from the archive. It will await the return of its Master with my momentary exit. My footsteps slowly disturbing the silence of the atmosphere, I approach the switches and flip them.

"Mmmffff"

Th-that…that wasn't me! What the?! I turn my head left to right, looking around for the source of the sound. I clutch the strap of my bag, pressing it into my chest with the feeling of anger sitting over my head. If someone is messing with me there's going to be hell to pay! No way I'm staying here longer than I need to!

Let me think, if I could hear this odd noise more clearly from the light switch, then that means whatever is making that noise is closer to the switch. But should I investigate? What if it's something scary… Stop thinking weird things… This is the same archive you've been working at for eternity. Well there's only the deviant works and the hall to the art section across from the lights. I guess I have a 50% chance of picking the correct side first. I reckon the art section is more likely have some stragglers. One would have to go a bit more out of their way to reach it. I turn to the right and follow the floor to the gallery. Hopefully I'll find whatever I'm looking for… whoever I'm looking for rather quickly. I don't have time for this.

As I step into the room of art, I'm quickly reminded that I had shut the lights off and am walking in near darkness. I gaze at the various contributions of artists across time that have come and gone. Some leave their mark and move on; others enjoy the company and stick around. I haven't been

here in a long time, I should appreciate this area more often. Anywho, I don't see any figures in the dark but I should be more thorough than this. I snap my fingers and create a magical source of light that floats above me to illuminate the world for me. Investigating the various pieces in the gallery, some cast shadows beyond their forms. But the reality is, nothing's here. I was hoping I'd find something, anything. Maybe I'm getting too tired from having spent all my time working. I am having a hard time adjusting to the work balance.

After giving the area one final walkthrough, I snap my fingers again, erasing the light and returning the area to darkness. It's been quiet for a while. I'm just imagining things because I'm tired. I turn back towards the main hall of the archive, staring into the deviant section as I step forward. I've looked around this much, I guess it can't hurt to check the final area. I'm a responsible God after all. I glance down at the floor by the entrance to the new section and notice something on the ground. I snap my fingers once more to have a clearer look at the object in question. I stare bewildered at the discovery of the item. It captivates my curiosity.

"S-someone's underwear!? Disgusting!" I walk towards it and crouch down. The light reflects back brighter as I get a closer look at it. A pure white pair of panties sits here, but why? What in the world? I poke at it with my bag. It seems some manner of degenerates have visited the archive. I wonder how long ago… and who would even been bold enough to do that here? I reach out and grab it, what would I even do with this. Take it to the lost and found? Would anybody even be bold enough to claim it? I slide it into my bag's front pocket and stand up. I shut the light off and walk into the curious section of the archive.

So it seems somebody was here doing something dirty! I can't determine a specific time frame. On top of that, I wasn't paying attention to guests at all today. Perhaps they got excited from seeing the art section. Walking further down the hall, I continue into the deviant section. If… I were to do that here… This section would be too obvious. But maybe that's the genius of it. Nobody would

check this section because of its obviousness. I apprehensively grab the strap of my bag and walk forward into the final section of the archive.

"Haaaaah…"

It sounds like someone is trying to hide their voice but now I can hear it a bit more clearly. A moan is travelling across the air. I delve deeper into the section, looking for the source of this sound. I'm not really sure what I'll do when I find them. I guess I'll just yell at them and scare them off. This is annoying. Why is this happening during my time here? Go do this shit on Chrono's shift!

This is the last area to check, they can't be anywhere else. So this must be where this strange person is hiding. I step slowly, quietly, trying not to garner their attention while trying to find whomever is hidden in the darkness here. Luckily, light from the glass ceiling exposes them to me. Maybe that's why they're underneath it. Through the books and files sitting on the shelves, I sneak a glance. I spot two people on a couch. I feel my eyes widen at the sight! Shock and disbelief take hold of me as I stare at the couple in silence. One of them is behind the other. If I sneak a bit closer, I might be able to get a better look at both. I keep behind the bookcase as best I can, peeking my head off to the side to stare at them. I spy a mask covering the one sitting on the couch.

She's staring off to the side, appearing indifferent to whatever is going on. The one in front of her has her face stuffed into the seated girl's neck. Her face isn't hidden by a mask. There's a red colour covering her. What is she doing? I stare in amazement and curiosity, as if time itself has frozen. The girl in front is so passionate about what she's doing. She has rich, full dark hair which contrasts with the other girl's misty, snow white hair. I know a girl with hair like that but no way she would be doing that here… with someone else…

I set my gaze back on the girl in front, she pulls away from the neck of the other as her hands work their way down the pale girl's body. If anything, they're both pretty pale, like porcelain dolls. They radiate in the darkness of the moonlit night. The one in front turns towards me, I spy red

dripping down her face. The same red drips down the pale naked body of the girl in front of her. No way! Are you?! I gasp and immediately cover my face with my hands, hiding behind the bookshelf. Oh no. They probably heard… I… I messed up… I crouch down and imagine that it makes me more hidden. She saw me. She definitely saw me.

A-AION! What are you doing?! That was definitely Aion. Who is special enough to get Aion to do something like this, in a public area at that?! I peek around once more, trying to see what they're doing now. Dread strikes me through the chest as I stare right into the other girls eyes. She knows! She knows I see them! I hide again. I sit down, trying to still my heart as it beats at the speed of light. Who? Who is that other girl?

Aion… I thought… today was supposed to be for me… You didn't show up… Who's the one in front of you? I… it… if she… is she? Could that… be why they visited the artist gallery first? Th-then this p-person is… My heart drops once more. No way… A-Aion?! I… I know we've had some issues recently but… but to… do this…

I pause and shake my head, my breath is shaky and desperate. They're… they're both… I peek back around the corner to watch what's going on. The unknown girl had wrapped around the other side of her prey, sinking her mouth into the Aion's neck. Is… is she really biting into her?

I push my hand into my bag and grab the pair of panties. Th-this is… This belongs to Aion! And I'm… bringing it to my face… completely unabashedly. I breath in the scent of her deeply. My heart aches in pain. What am I doing right now? My head refuses to believe the scene going on in front of me. I can't think straight.

My hands send themselves down to my crouch. I stare at the other two, my heart full of envy and despair. My stomach tingles. Do I feel sick or am I jealous? Am I… jealous? Do I wish that I… No! I'm… I'm upset! S-she stood me up! H-how dare she! I asked her to come by for her interview and this is how I'm t-treated? Fingers slipping beneath my skirt, beneath my leggings. I touch my lower

pair of lips, my groin aching. I'm so upset. I am so upset! Th-that bitch! She! She's! She's… My thoughts torment my mind with the fear of the unknown and of betrayal. My actions, however, don't align themselves with these thoughts.

The mystery girl stares right at me, her hands lavishly stuffing Aion's crotch. A devilish smirk sits on her face as she looks at me. She knows I'm here. The situation is completely opposite of what it should be. I should've caught them but… they caught me… I watch her hands fiddle with Aion as if it was natural. She sits there, her face focused on her work like always. How could this happen to me? I've made my mistakes but I didn't do anything to deserve this.

If I leave… does that mean I give up? But if I stay… W-what am I thinking? Why would I stay and give her the satisfaction of… of… of s-s-stealing her… I mean… I'm no quitter… I… Th-there's nothing wrong with watching right? L-leaving would be like admitting defeat! Yeah! I can't leave!

The mystifying figure finally lifts herself away, keeping her eyes firmly locked on me as she takes hold of Aion's face. She points her head towards me and for a moment, my eyes lock with hers and my heart shatters as we share a forbidden moment in time with each other.

I shove a hand up into my shirt and squeeze my right boob. My nipples stiffening themselves against the attention they begin to receive only serves to further turn me on. Electricity is rocketing all over my body, I'm paralysed. She lets go of Aion and she looks away again, perhaps, if for a moment, her icy cold skin shows a bit of life with some blushing in her face. I gaze in awe at this homewrecker as she picks herself up away Aion and moves onto the floor below, staring at the hole she was fingering moments before. The unknown woman lifts her fingers into her mouth and pushes them inside. Pulling them out, strings of saliva fall from her lips. She places her hands on the inner thighs of her victim.

"Oh pity me, my Queen. None of my work seems to be garnering any of your attention." The

voice pleads to her, sending me back to reality for a moment. I can only stare curiously at the new development of the scene. Aion keeps herself in the same position, still staring down at her book or whatever it is in her hands. The woman adjusts her hands once more, having them ride up the thighs of the pale, silent girl. Slowly, she spreads Aion's legs open. She places her rustic lips on the girl's thighs, kissing up to her hips and then switches sides. Kisses in a forbidden fluid run up and down Aion, yet they don't get any of her attention. This perplexing woman stops and brings her head around, staring back at me. My heart stalls, it freezes, it stops. She's looking at me. I'm looking at her. A disgusting smirk builds itself over her face. Her fangs shine in the light. She looks back up at Aion.

"Oh darling you wound me so! Not even a reply for your beloved~" Words escape her maw once more. She lowers her face back down and her hands travel up the chilling, slender body. She pushes her mouth into Aion's crotch, hiding away, but I know what she's really doing. Kissing the lips that lie between her hips. My hands immediately shoot back down my own body. I unbutton my *jeans*, easing access for myself as I watch in silent rage. In loud frustration. One finger, two fingers, three fingers slide themselves over my soaking bottom. I rub myself like a mad woman. My other hand relentlessly tugging on a stiff nipple. Despite the pain I'm causing myself, I can't stop. I can't stop watching her eat Aion out.

"Yidhra, there's always time. Calm yourself." Yidhra? Aion said Yidhra! The name of this despicable woman! But even so, with this knife in my heart, I can't help but watch Yidhra service her. Even with her unforgivable grin, I can't bring myself to hate Yidhra. I'm enamoured by her. Entranced. I'm enjoying it too…

My fingers relentlessly assault my own body, wishing I was one of them. My heart begs that I was one of them. I push my face out, trying to get a better view of anything and everything. My right leg is trembling, is it out of pleasure or fear? I can hear Yidhra get her fill of Aion. The sloppy

sound of her kissing and sucking echoes in my head. I can only eagerly stare at the two as Yidhra focuses on Aion. Unfortunately, Yidhra isn't giving me anymore attention. I'm making a mess of myself in the archive. The depraved nature of my act framing me as a degenerate in my own right. I need something… anything… My mind muddied with the lewd acts, I let go of my nipple and look for something thick and sturdy. I pull out my diary.

"Th-this will work… I can… just… just… rub it with my hips… th-that's normal…" I say to myself as my soaked digits leave my aching hole. I lift up from the stained floor, hoping that it were my lips the ones being treated at the moment. I hold the book up on its side as I push my pelvis into it, hoping that maybe this will calm my shattered heart.

Yidhra pulls her head away from Aion and returns to her thighs, setting kisses and bites along both sides. Her face still stoic, Aion continues to keep her flawless gaze on her work. Her eyes widen however when Yidhra pushes her down onto the couch. With her hand flat on Aion's stomach she pushes her face in as far as it will go. Surprisingly, Aion wraps her legs around Yidhra's head. In a similar move, Yidhra pushes her face further down into Aion's body but this time, Yidhra gets a squeal out of her girl. Aion immediately places her book to the side and her head falls back into the couch. I-I've never heard her make that noise before!

Frustratingly, I go back to grabbing at my chest. A feeling beyond envy envelopes my entire being as my hips push down into my diary, the hardest they've done so in months. S-she got Aion to finally shatter that wall! H-how did she do it? My eyes focus on the actions going on, eagerly awaiting more to get my fill.

Aion's hands push Yidhra down further into her crotch, much to the enjoyment of her partner. Aion quickly lets go and grasps at the couch, as if she was looking for something to grip while Yidhra cleaned her out. I hear the laboured breaths of Yidhra. She's certainly not wasting any moments in between breathing and devouring her prey. I let go of my chest and frantically look

around for the now stolen pair of panties I had found earlier. They're on the floor by my legs; I reach for them and push them into my face. It's not fair! It's not fair at all! My anger and my despair mix together, filling me with a ghastly, gluttonous, unglamorous, grotesque and saccharine sense as I finally get to see Aion properly pleasured for once. Pulling my hand down, my grip tight around the underwear, I push it into my crotch and furiously rub my pussy with it. Aion's hands have moved up and above her attackers head, reaching for the couch behind her.

Yidhra's face finally pulls up, her face wet with the fruits of her labor. She pushes herself into Aion, placing wet kisses on her face through the *mask*. Aion turns her head off to the side at first, as if trying to hide how she really feels before Yidhra grabs her ass, turning her to the side, facing me. Perhaps to give me a clearer view of the action.

Yidhra's hands climb up to Aion's face. She reaches behind her ears and unhooks her mask, freeing her flawless face for the first time tonight. Her tongue sticks out, pools of saliva sinking out of her mouth before Yidhra moves back in. She takes Aion's tongue and all into her mouth, invading Aion's at the same time. Her hands creep back down the other's body, shoving her fingers back into the Goddess' soaked pussy. The lewd, squishy sounds of her fingers sliding in and out of Aion echo into the hall. It crushes my spirit, but not as much as it turns me on. Small whimpers escape from Aion's mouth, the sounds matching up with what I had heard when the investigation began. Did they want to be caught? Did Yidhra make her squeal earlier in the night to drag me over here and humiliate me?

Continuing her domination, Yidhra pushes Aion all the way down on the sofa, exposing her body completely before climbing on top of her. She lifts Aion's leg and spares Aion no privacy as her pussy and asshole lay out on full display for her conqueror. Yidhra shoots a seductive smile upward before hitting third base a third time. I have a full view of Yidhra shoving her tongue up Aion's asshole, her left hand pulling at Aion's nipples and her right hand caressing her ass. Her flooded lips

on full display to me, Aion places her hands on top of Yidhra's head. How much I wish I could be in that position. Sadly, my only response is to turn my masturbating on autopilot, hoping to somehow match the pleasure Aion is receiving. I sit, forcing myself to watch the two make love. I stop my hips and focus on my hand with her panties in them. Rapidly rubbing my cunt, my heart skips a beat with each gasp Aion lets me hear. The burning within my chest only grows and grows with each moan. I'm furious, I'm jealous, I'm seething, I'm upset, I'm irrational and I'm only this because it's the closest thing to feeling like I'm you, Aion.

Seeing her slender, perfect body being pleasured by Yidhra sends waves of pleasure to my swollen pussy. I didn't even notice I came. It was different from the usual electric feeling. I feel it in my stomach, from the deepest pits of my stomach to my heart. It's a vortex of emotions washing in and out of me. Oh how I wish I could be there underneath Aion, helping service her.

How I despair that I'm watching this play out. How jealous I am of them both. How upset it makes me that the two continue to ignore me, keeping their attention for each other. It is an atrocious feeling that grips its hideous self on my pure heart. I feel so horrible and helpless, I can't believe it's real. I want to vomit; my chest hurts. I need something, anything, to help cleanse my soul. But I *chose* to stay. I *chose* to watch. I *chose* them over my pride. I *chose* them over myself.

Not long after my disgusting post orgasm, Yidhra's tongue finally gets the better of Aion. Her work completes. Aion finally succumbs to the attack as her body quivers over the other. She cums all over Yidhra, unable to keep her leg up, they accompany the orgasm over Yidhra. The liquid spilling over her partner, the couch, drips onto the floor. A pooling concoction of love fluids mix. If I could satisfy her like that…

With the action finally slowing down, Aion covers her eyes with her arms. Her panting matches my own. Her chest rises and falls higher and lower than it had at any point before. Her neck and thighs lined with bite marks, blood no longer pouring out of the wounds from her assailant. I shake

with frustration as I only watched. A pathetic thought from a pathetic person. As the show ends, Yidhra picks herself up and wanders over to something on the floor next to the couch. She pulls up a towel, patting it on herself and then on Aion. They say something to each other, then laugh. Aion grabs the towel and tosses it on the floor. It lands into the puddle. She reaches into her bag and pulls out a couple of syringes with plastic caps on top. She tosses one onto Aion's stomach, causing her to move her arms away from her eyes. Her blank, indifferent stare hits the needle, not phased at all by what's next. Yidhra turns around and simply smiles at me, cementing the memories of the night into my head for the rest of my life.

Paradigm

The clicks and clacks of steel running over steel. I didn't notice I had dozed off. I was… I was heading home. I put my left hand on my forehead and rub it. What in the world? This is a… it's a *train*. I look around the train car. Empty. What's going on here? Let's start with the time. 23:34. I know I haven't slept much lately but I never thought I'd just pass out on the train. When did I get on? Where did I get on?

The sound of metal pulling on metal starts as the train slows down. It's stopping, that's good. The conductor will announce the upcoming station and I can get my bearings. There is a distinct lack of sound as the train does finally stop and the doors open up. Alright, maybe the announcement system is down. I'll hop off here and take a look at a map of the station. If I can just discover the route this train takes I can make my way back to Tokyo. I get up to walk towards the nearest door to me. Oddly, my feet take a moment to reach the ground. That seat is pretty big. I look back at it, something enters my vision and I freeze in place. I'm sure it's coming off as impolite but I'm wholly in disbelief as it walks over from the door further down the train cart. It takes the seat right next to where I was! The train doors begin to close, there's no announcement. Forget the announcement, what the hell is this thing?! I'm trying really hard not to stare but this is so interesting. I can't help it.

An anthropomorphic letter R is swinging its feet on the seat. Well, I assume that's their feet, it's really just the lower parts of the… letter… swinging… I hope I'm not obvious about my staring. Ok, I'll scan the train cart, act like I'm looking at other things to get a couple more stares in.

Let's see, front of the train car, door out, a couple seats, the letter R with eyes, arms and legs, another door, more seats, the back of the train car. It's transparent. I can clearly discern the seat it's

sitting in. Ok, I must be dreaming right now. I have to be. This situation doesn't make any sense. I lightly slap my face and rapidly blink, maybe this will do something for me. The train, however, rides forward and the clickety-clack sounds continue as the gaps in the rail are run over by the wheels. I hop back into the seat above me. I've been in weird situations before, but this is a clear winner. Never did I ever once even for a moment at any point in time in my existence imagine the letter R would get on the train and sit inside it.

Wait, what if I'm the same as it? How do I know this isn't just how things in this dream look. What do I look like and what am I carrying with me? Am I an abyssal creature of inhumanity as well? I look down at myself, partly to confirm I wasn't an imaginary creature, partly to feign searching for my bag. Fortunately, my body is my body, same as it ever was. I wonder, since I'm still me, am I the odd one here? I stretch both of my hands out, still hoping that at some point, something will wake me up. I pull up my *bag* from my left side and I set it over my thighs. I open it up and check out what's inside. Empty.

Putting my bag back to the side and sighing, I fold my arms over my chest and think about my next course of action. This train cart is massive. Or is it because it's so empty in here it appears larger? Where do I even begin? Should I try talking to the…letter R? Would it even understand me? Does it know English? Or do I speak Japanese? Where are we? Is this still Japan? The train car looks Japanese. Ok, too many thoughts. Just pick one and go from there Cass.

I clear my throat, clasp my hands together and turn towards the letter R. "Hi, excuse me. What's the next stop on the route?" Although the sound of the train moving continues, I never receive an answer. I just keeps waving its legs back and forth without a care in the world. Well, I suppose I'll just ride on until we hit the next stop. The outside world is dark. I can't see out of the window. Only the reflections from the outdoor lights that reflect on the windows. Oh, you idiot, you're a time traveler! What is with your constant refusal to use your power? Just go back in time and see how

you ended up here! I extend my left arm out and think about rolling time back on myself by an hour. That should give me some sort of answer to my predicament. Snapping my fingers and closing my eyes, I open them up to a not so shocking surprise.

The only thing that changes is the speed of the train as it slows down. My ability isn't working. Figures in the darkness become visible as we approach the next station. I can make out the forms of buildings out beyond the railings of the train tracks. The neon signs in the heart of civilisation return the closer and closer we get. I hop out of my seat and *climb* onto the other side. Let's see if I can't get a better view of things. This certainly looks like Japan but the guy behind me tells me this is a little different from the world I'm from. The platform comes into view and I get a gander at everyone lining up to get onto the train. Scattered over the platform are various shapes and creatures in similar manner to the letter R behind me. Other letters of alphabet like O, A, U, I, N, and C are all neatly lined up. Next to them are some sort of tube shaped creatures on two comically small legs. Then, mixed in-between these interesting creatures, are some normal looking humans. They're all in queue for the train. It's sort of normal, in a horrifying cosmic sort of way. Guess this station is a more popular than the last one. I see a *face* in the crowd staring at me. I stare back at her. She smiles. I smile back. A sense of urgency strikes me. The train finally stops and the doors open.

That girl who smiled at me, it was like staring at my reflection. It definitely wasn't the window either either. I saw the lights and shadows on her face under the incandescent streetlight. One, two, three…six lines away. I have to find her. Who is she? I rush out of the cart, sneaking through all the creatures getting on and move toward the line she was in. Most of them are already crowding into the carts and are sitting down.

Despite my search, I'm unable to find the face I saw in the crowd. The train doors shut and the wheels begin pushing forward. It picks up speed and starts flying off into the darkness. I see. I think I'm starting to get it now. She has somewhere to be. I have somewhere to be too.

I look around at the train stop, it's disturbingly empty. Guess everyone had somewhere to go. Hah… Some fog makes itself comfortable in the area, maybe this station is near water. I wander the platform for a bit until I find the information post. Despite its massive size, I can't see it very well. I step up on my toes, I think I can read some of the symbols. Kisaragi Station. I'm not familiar with this one. There's nothing around here, just some gates to exit the station. Maybe leaving and checking around the local area is the play.

Up close, the gates look huge. Everything in this world, this dream, whatever it is, looks massive. I push it with all my strength, but I struggle to so much as budge the metal contraption. I can't even reach the handles of the gate, they're a couple *heads* above me. I step away from the structure and look around for something that might control the gates. Oh, there's some sort of button next to the left handle. I hope that'll let me out. The issue is reaching it. I don't think there's anything here I can grab to stand on. I suppose I could try climbing it, there are small gaps in the gate. Anything here is worth a shot. I grip my fingers into a gap with my left hand and then pull higher with my right. I kick the tips of my shoes in and try my best to balance on the gate.

I climb up off of the ground to go up a bit. I raise my left hand again and tightly hold with my right so I can try bringing my feet up. The button is closer, if I could just get my *little* fingers a bit… little fingers? I pull my right hand out of the holes and stare at my hand. The metal bars feel strange. It's like… Wait a second… I look up at the gate, it's slouching downward? The bars feel squishy, sort of like rubber!

"Wha?!" I let go of the gate and fall on my ass. Fuck that hurts. I lay in an embarrassing silence for a moment. The gate isn't actually a gate? What the hell is this thing? Did putting weight on it do that? I sit myself up, staring at how much closer my feet are to my waist and how much shorter my arms look. I flip my hands over to my palms. The white impression lines on my chubby, little fingers left by the gate sting. Everything hurts right now and yet all I did was fall such a short

distance. That's what it is! It's not that the world is big, it's that I became small. I'm a child. My arms, my legs, my hands, everything is miniaturised on myself. Whatever is going on here has curiously left me in this state.

"Maybe you should pinch your cheek to wake up." A voice speaks out from somewhere behind me. It scares me more than it should. The voice isn't callous or cold. I wonder if my tolerance for the strange and unusual has also shrunk. It could be because I'm all alone here or because I'm slowly realising the terror of being a powerless child? Not that I get a choice. I turn around to face that terror.

The figure behind the voice makes its way into my vision. Their hand is on their cheek, pinching it. Do they want me to mimic them? Although my fingers still hurt, I grab my cheek with my right hand and copy the motion. I can't say I'm surprised by nothing happening. The shadowy denizen makes their way into the light, smiling at me.

"Gya hah hah hah! No matter the time or place, you're always the same idiot!" I know that voice. I know that face. Because they're mine! It's shocking to see her but it's a huge relief.

"Nyarlathotep?!"

"That name, it's been so long since I've heard it. Do I look like Nyarlathotep at the moment?"

"Well no, you look an awful lot like me. Or how I used to look before turning back into a kid.."

"Indeed, you have become one. Most curious! I suppose if we look this similar we may be mistaken for sisters!"

"Sisters? No I mean c'mon that's just…"

"Very well! As big sis, it's my duty to help you out! Come along now, you won't be opening this gate yourself." She walks up to the gate and presses the button by the handle. Just as I figured. The gate opens. Slowly, impossibly slowly, the sound of metal scraping onto the concrete goes on for what feels like forever. We share a glance at each other as the gate makes its final push open. We

walk out together and into the area at large.

“Why are you here? How did…”

“Gya hah hah! You have to address your big sister as such before speaking.”

“What? No man that’s weird just s-”

“Shhhh, I don’t talk if you don’t ask. I’m not going to give up an opportunity to delight in your humiliation. Now, be a good girl and do as your told.” She smirks at me! With my own face! My own voice! What a bitch!

“Ok, fine. I will say those words you have told me to say. I’m going to say them shortly.” Maybe I can just go lay down on the train tracks and let come what may…

“I’m waiting!”

“Ahem… yes… big sis… I need to ask you some questions!” The deviant’s smile grows beyond what I ever thought possible for my face. Play it cool Cass, karma works both ways.

“There we go! Everyone loves a little go getter! I shall relay you with what I know, and you will do so in return.” I nod my head in agreement.

“First, you are a very long way from home. Second, you are not very far from home at all.”

“Is this some sort of riddle or something? I don’t understand.”

“It is vision in the darkness. It is fire that stays lit over water. It is a cool temperature that burns the skin. It is obvious, my dear Watson.”

“Ugh man, just… say it. Clearly.”

“No, you have to discern it on your own. I have given plentiful hints.”

“Plentiful? I don’t see how any of that helps me right now.”

““On the contrary, Watson, you can see everything. You fail, however, to reason from what you see.”” I let out a deep, ashamed sign. So that’s how it is.

“Who on Earth are *you* quoting?”

“Come on detective, surely you can think of a world away from your world. It’s not your first time after all.” A world away from my world in my world… I fail to reason from what I see…

“While you think, let’s walk around and explore a bit.” She walks out further out into the area. My goal was to check this place out before she showed up anyways.

The area is like every other of Tokyo, or well, Japan. Clean streets. I know they’re usually clean, but these are flawless. It’s almost like the concrete was just laid. Is it even real? It looks better than real. All the empty sidewalks, I know it’s late out but there’s no sound from humans. There’s only silence, you can’t even hear the buzz from the bright overhead lights.

These lights are too bright. Extremely bright, like some sort of additional bloom effect is pouring out of them and crashing down into the world below. It’s like we’re walking around inside a photo.

“Oh hey, isn’t that the café you saw Aion at the other day?” Big Sis says. What does she mean the other day?

“What?!” I return my focus to her; she’s pointing at a building across from us and winks at me. How does she know that’s where we were? Where has Big Sis been?

“Hey, hold on a sec, how do you know that?”

“We share a brain idiot.”

“If we share a brain you’re an idiot too!”

“I’m fine with that gya hah hah!” I have not missed the voice in my head, not a single bit. “Where have you been by the way, not that I really care or anything.” My voice timidly hides in the back of my throat with the sentence.

“I need an answer to my questions first.” I want to raise a fit and pout but that’s just a waste of time right now.

“I’ve seen baffling creatures, the lighting feels manufactured, we’re all alone in a major city and have inexplicably encountered the café where I met with Aion and the most unusual thing is that

you're here in person. This must be a dream." She doesn't say anything but I didn't need her to. Her facial expression tells me everything I need to know.

"But it's strange, I don't think this is the first dream I've been in. In fact, I couldn't even tell you when I started dreaming." Now that I think about it, I have absolutely no recollection of anything that's happened beyond the scope of where I am right now. It's entirely plausible that it's the second, third, hell it could be the tenth dream I've had so far.

"When did you first start noticing the symptoms, Watson?"

"I couldn't tell you exactly when. I have a vague recollection of events in my mind. I spoke to Cassidy after investigating the murder scene, took the train home, then went to sleep."

"Sounds like a pretty average sequence of events for you. Anything else?"

"I do believe I woke up only after a few hours of rest. I went out, bought a vinyl and a record player from some shop."

"As one normally does at midnight. Anything else?" I'm not sure if I should let her know I was feeling a little murderesque… but maybe that's not information I should withhold either. There's so much the two of us need to go over. Just say it Cass, not like she'd judge you for it.

"I have to admit, I went out on another late-night walk. The usual kind. Like the kind in those poems you had way back."

"When I was trying to finalise the possession? When you quite literally stabbed me?"

"Yes, like time I stabbed you. I was trying to protect myself; you don't get to complain about getting stabbed." She rolls her eyes and puts a hand on her hip. So immature.

"I can't say I'm fond of my failure in the attempt. At any rate, you went out to try and satiate my desires again? Interesting."

"Your desires?"

"Yes, my desires idiot. A goody two shoes like you can't hurt others. Not like *that* at least. I

imagine my prolonged stay in your mind is having a negative effect on your psyche. You ran into that girl laid out on the street but you didn't do anything to her. In fact you helped her, so I'd say you're still sane. Mostly." She smirks at me and raises her hands and shoulders in a shrug.

"It's still not a good sign. These thoughts possess my mind in moments of weakness, fatigue, I can't silence them. What should I do? What do you think?" I stare at her and then at the cafe. No I'm not going in clueless again. I want to know what's going on. "In fact, I answered your stupid riddle, I have questions for you!" I point at her and she nods at me. She sits down on the sidewalk. I sit down next to her, preparing my barrage of questions.

"For starters, where the hell have you been?"

"That little body swap Chrono did left me on the AI's network. We were effectively separated."

"It separated us? He did mention that you were backed up to the server but…"

"Well, it was quite a shock to me! I took a nice little cat nap for myself and before I knew it, I woke up on the other side, so to speak. I've just been waiting for you to return." Hmm, the day I was assigned to the case. So she's been gone the whole time. Oh! Then she never saw the murder scene!

"Do you have any recollection of the case I've been working so far?"

"Can't say that I do." She replies.

"Interesting. I noticed that I wasn't affected by the same issue the others experienced. I assumed it was your doing, even if you weren't conscious of it."

"What do you mean? Elaborate."

"Right, so, this murder scene was guarded by a spirit or something. Whispers would steer people away from the scene."

"Whispers? What kind of whispers?" She asks. I shrug my shoulders at her question.

"I can't say. I never experienced them, never heard 'em. I just assumed it was you protecting me

from them.”

“Fortunately, it wasn’t me. I would’ve delighted in watching your mind suffer!” I glare at her, but she only smiles happily back at me. “I will only fathom a guess, but I would say my being in your mind has instilled a natural resistance to the eldritch trickery that exists in the darkness of the cosmos. You would be wise to show some gratitude. The awe inspiring and amazing talent of Nyaralathotep has rubbed off on your pathetic monkey brain!”

“Man, relax. I’m just trying to figure out what’s going on.” Her smile shrinks a little. I wonder if she’s actually listening to me for once. “Ok, for whatever reason, the whispers don’t stop me. I investigated the scene, found almost 30 dead bodies. I time traveled to watch how it happened, but I couldn’t see the culprit, their figure was blurred. It actually hurt to stare at, like my head was burning when I tried to look at them.”

“Ah, interesting. I have an idea of what’s going on but…”

“What are you thinking?”

“Well now that we're together again, we share one mind. Let Big Sis do the thinking for you.” She's still saying that... Well whatever, her input is good. She'll see angles I can't.

“Ah there we are. It's some lowly, no name, cosmic beast behind it all. Whispers were the first give away but a proactive, hidden guise, veiling their form that works even in time travel? Too needlessly complex to not be a beast. Whispers and dreams. Lucky for you, here I am, returned to my near omnipotent state.”

“That’s good. Right? Ok. Now how do I get out of this dream?” I'll try to keep that name in mind, hopefully I remember it when I wake up.

“How’d you get out last time you were in a dream loop?” She asks.

“I attacked you.” I answer.

“Killed, but yes, you have the right of it. Since you seem to be the only main character in *this*

dream, the caster of this paradigm does not need to give it any focus."

"What does that mean?" I ask.

"I suppose you'll have to find a way to stop yourself from dreaming. I can't help you this time because I'm not the cause of the dream." She tilts her head towards the café. "You can probably find something in there to help you out."

"What will happen when I wake up?" I ask.

"The same thing that happens every time you wake up." She answers.

"What's that?" I ask.

"You get up and try again." She answers.

"That's it?" I stare at her.

"That's all you humans have ever done. You call it living. In fact, I recall you having a very heated argument with Aion to keep the right to continue living." She nods at me and smiles. Odd how her smile reassures me. I can vividly recall the day when that same smile terrified me.

"Live? Really? You of all the people, you're the one to tell me to live? Ahaha." We laugh together for a brief moment. It's strange. When exactly did I get to this point? I'd be free of her forever and now that I'm here, I don't want that.

"All I ask is that you defeat this fiend. I couldn't live down the failure of losing to a second being below me. With this request, I shall impart you with my knowledge. A problem is easier to solve when you know where it lies after all."

"Right. I'll win... and thanks." I get off the ground and cross the street for the café.

"Fret not my dear Watson, for when you feel that inexplicable fear crawl underneath your skin, the hair on your body stand on its own, the sweat drip down your brow, the electricity grasp your spine, the paranoia set into your mind, razing your skull with delirium as your eyes roll back into your head, it is the fear that I hope reminds you of the brief moment in time in which you had

defeated The Great Speaker, The Messenger of the Old Ones, Nyarlathotep!" Her form shimmers as her edgy little speech ends. I walk into the cafe alone, I know what I need to wake up.

I return from inside the café with a knife in my hand. My form around her vanishes and it returns to a more fitting look for a monster of chaos. I keep my eyes on them, even though I can feel the inside of head burn in pain. The sensation reminds me of staring at the monster from the crime scene. Although, I can tell Nyaralathotep wasn't joking about being greater. This monster is a pain to just think about. I suppose most people would be driven mad by this point. I'm thankful for the protection my mind received for being its puppet for a millennia. I crouch down and pick up the object shining in the darkness of the cafe floor. Fitting that this is what will wake me up. I turn it towards myself, raising it up to my neck. The pressure of stress makes my hand shake.

Perhaps I've already gone *crazy*. No. I've been *crazy* for a long time.

Undoubtedly you are you. Cassandra Watson, the undeniable enigma engine.

Part Seven- All of Me

Memories in Dreams

“Oh no! It's in my left hand! Sorry. Wanna try again?” I open my hand, revealing the correct position of the coin. The man smiles but shakes his head and walks away. That's the fifteenth incorrect guess in a row. Footsteps approach from behind, hands grip my shoulders.

“Cass! You're killing it today! We're gonna have so much money for things!.” Daphne exclaims, shaking me. She's right. Some people guess with quarters, some with five bucks. I toss the coin behind me. She let's go of me to catch the money. I can hear her laugh and toss the coin into the pile she has at our booth. We run a little guessing game here in Central Park by Bethesda Fountain. Strangers play a guessing game with me. If they win then I give them our pile of loot. If I win, I get whatever they put up. However, I never lose.

“Come on up! Test fate! See if you can beat the luckiest girl alive!” Daphne shouts into the park. It's harmless, mostly. Maybe there's one advantage that I have that we don’t disclose. A couple of people approach Daph and they discuss what to offer. He's already chosen to pick my left hand.

I'm lucky, but not in the sense for guessing odds or anything. I'm lucky because I have an incredible ability. The two guys approach me, one hands me a ten dollar bill. I take it in hand and put both of my hands behind my back. I switch which hand the bill is in a few times, letting it sit in my right. I already know what he's decided because I see happen before they happen. It's slightly rigged in my favour. It's fine. Innocent fun.

“Which hand?” I ask.

“Left! Definitely the left, it was the last one to move.” He says. I put my hands forward and open them up, revealing my prize in my right hand.

“Dang it. I totally thought it was the left.”

“Would you like to play again?” I ask.

“Nah I'm spent. You wanna try dude?” He asks his friend.

“Nope.” A quick reply and the two walk away. Running comes up behind me once again.

“Holy moly! Ten smackers, Watson!” Daphne says significantly more excited than last time.

“Not bad huh?” I reply.

“We could buy a mansion one day dude! Think of all the suckers we can scam!” She shouts.

“Daph, shut up or you'll expose us. And we aren't scamming anybody. It's just a game.” I tell her. She nods and I hand the money to her. She returns and places it into the pile with the rest of our loot. That's my sixteenth win today.

We continue trying to get people to play but as the sun starts setting we find less and less willing players. We take our winnings and decide to grab some snacks before Althea returns. Daphne wraps up the bag and I take the sign down. We take the booth down together and walk it underneath Bethesda Terrace. We set it down and out of the way, returning to the fountain.

We both sit on the edge, swinging our feet. She ties the loot bag up in a knot and zips it up in her backpack. Daphne holds on to it like she's going to her first day of school. The park is thinning out. Some late evening walkers but the crowds are all gone. A single woman is walking down the terrace.

“Hey, how about we get some pizza? We have enough to grab a whole pie.” Daphne speaks up.

“Oh, yeah sure. Where at?” I ask her. The figure in the terrace gets closer to us. She's really pretty, now that I can see her. Her hair is white. That's bizarre. Maybe it's the lighting? It looks like she's in a suit. Her clothing is really high quality. It shines in the faux tunnel. I guess you really do find all sorts out here.

“Hmm, SOL’s Pizza? I like how they taste.” She answers.

“Oh yeah! That place is good. Let's get one with all the toppings and bring it back. Oh, but what about Althea? If we’re not here when she gets back she’s gonna leave us…” I pull out my pocket watch and check the time. 6:50 pm. Althea will be here at 7:00 pm. Can a pizza finish in ten minutes?

“How about this, I go get the pizza and you wait for Althea?” Daphne says. I put my watch in her bag and smile.

“I’ll wait. Hey, leave the bag with me. Are you going to be ok going by yourself?” I ask her. She puts an offended look on her face and takes off her backpack. She pulls out some money from inside then closes the bag back up, tossing it to me.

“Will I be ok? Do you think I'm a little baby or somethin'? Course I'll be ok. You wait here like the baby you are!” She leaps off of the fountain and starts walking away.

“I'll be seeing you in a bit with the biggest pizza you've ever seen!” She shouts at me and walks past a woman who is exiting underneath the terrace. Biggest pizza ever huh? I guess we've “earned” it. The woman walks towards the fountain. The fountain that I'm on. The woman is walking towards me?!

“Hey kid, I'd like to play that game of yours.” Her voice is so smooth. She sounds cool! Her hair really is white, it's not a trick like in the movies or something. She looks so good. Why am I thinking this? It's like I'm enchanted by her. She's so beautiful. A living Goddess. I feel like I have to talk to her but I'll have to disappoint.

“I'm sorry ma'am, we’re done for the day. You can come back tomorrow if you'd like to play.” I deliver her the news.

“Surely you can do one more game? For me?” She pleads, holding out a hundred dollar bill. Bloody hell that's a lot of money! This lady must be an angel because she’s so heavenly!

“I mean, I guess I could do one more. Everything in my bag for everything in your hand?” I ask

her. She nods and hands me the money. She's chosen my right hand. Oh man we're going to be rich! I switch the money around in both my hands behind my back, leaving it in my left hand.

“Alright, what’s your choice ma’am?” I ask her. She points to my right hand with her finger.

“Ok, right hand.” I say, undoubtedly with a smile on my face. Too easy! I pull my right hand forward and open it up.

“I'm so sorry. Maybe you'd like to try again?”

“Try again? But I won.” She says. Panicking, I stare down at my right hand. What the heck? It was in my left! I'm certain I left it in my left because I knew she would choose my right hand. How did this happen? I look around the area, still mostly empty. There are a couple women standing over the railing on the upper part of the terrace. Witnesses to my loss...

“Oh! OH! You did win! Wow? Congrats!” I hand the woman her money back. No way. I can't lose like this. Daph is gonna be pissed. She's gonna go on and on about me losing as soon as she left me alone. I have to try again.

“And the rest?” She asks, pointing at my bag.

“Hey, how about we spice it up a bit? I’ll give you everything in this bag and bring you everything I won yesterday too.” I suggest to her.

“That's enticing but, how do I know you aren't lying and won't return with yesterday's winnings?” She asks. Crap, she saw right through me.

“I'm good on my word! You can trust me!” I exclaim to her. I really can't lose all this!

“Promise?” She asks.

“Promise.” I answer.

“Alright kid, double or nothing.” She pulls out another hundred dollars and hands both to me. This is making me so nervous. This is a ton of money! Alright, be cool. I can do this. I just got mesmerised by her beauty or something. I was just off my guard. It's no big deal. I can feel it. She's

going to choose right again.

I flip the money behind my back again, between my hands. I've never lost before and now I'm worried. I grip the dosh with my left. I squeeze my hand to make sure it stays there. The money feels sweaty. I'm sweating. This is exhilarating. What a rush. Unfortunately for her, I will be winning this time.

“Which hand?” I ask the mysterious woman.

She points again at my right hand again but she's not going to be right again! I bring both hands forward again and open up her hand of choice. I can feel the sweaty bill in my left, there's no way I mixed them up again.

“Oh nice, I won again.” She says. I stare down, bewildered at the two hundred dollars sitting in my right hand. What the hell is going on? How did I lose twice? I know it was in my left hand. I grab one of the bills with my left hand and rub it. It's sweaty. Were both of my hands sweating? I don't know. She beat me again. My ability has failed twice now.

“Well?” She asks expectantly. I lost again.

“Right, you won, again.” I bitterly say. My stomach fills up with butterflies. This strange woman has beaten me twice in a row out of the hundred of games I've played here. I hand her back her money and pull the backpack up.

“Cass, Daph, you two ready?” Shouting comes from behind me. I look back and see Althea! What a life saver! Get me out of this situation without losing too much!

“Ahem.” The woman in front of me says.

“Hey that whole, double or nothing thing was just joking right? You wouldn't take a poor kids money now would ya?” I plead to her.

“Is that how you operate? You made a promise kid, keep it.” She responds.

“Is everything alright here? Cass?” Althea asks. She walks up next to me.

“I'm sorry, are you two connected? Look, what I’m really here for is you, scam artist. I'm going to take your friend here down to the station for scamming people out of there money.” The lady with white hair says to Althea. She pulls a badge out from her coat and flashes it at us.

“Cass?” Althea asks. I can hear the disappointment in her voice.

“It’s all me. My friend here has nothing to do with this.” I admit to the woman.

“You're coming with me.” She pulls out a pair of handcuffs and shoves my hands behind my back. The cuffs crash into my arms and she slams the locking mechanism in place. It really hurts. How did things escalate this much?

“And you, you can come by the station later if you want to pick her up.” I think she's telling that to Althea. The woman starts dragging me away with her.

“Wait here for Daph!” I shout at her. This lady is a cop? Then she should know me! I work with the team here!

“Hey, I'm one of you. Really. We're on the same side, let's talk this out.” I plead with her.

We walk briskly through the park, we've crossed almost the entire thing in a few seconds! A cruiser is parked on the side of the road up ahead, that must be hers. She suddenly pushes me inside of it and I find myself sitting in the backseat of the police vehicle. How on Earth is she so fast? We speed through the streets of Manhattan towards my looming punishment. What a drag!

Each minute we spend together feels like an eternity. Even if all the lights and billboards above us flash by in an instant, with her it's dreadful. We're only a few blocks down from the police station. They know me, I've worked with the staff before. They'll put a good word in for me, I know it. This must be a joke.

We pull up to the station and park in front of it. She gets out and opens my door. She stares at me expectantly. I scoot out of the back and step out of the vehicle. She grabs my right arm and pushes me forward. We enter the station together, I can feel my face burning up. I'm so embarrassed. I

didn't think for a second that this would be how I return to this place. I try to keep out of view from the police here as we walk through the station. She takes me all the way to the back, into an empty interrogation room. She opens the door and pushes me in. I've never seen the inside of one of these things before. It's scary. What am I gonna do?

“Sit.” She tells me. I take a seat at the lone table in the room and she exits, shutting the door behind her. There's a single light in here that shines above the table. I can hear her walk off and then it becomes silent. The only noise is my unstable breathing. This is bad. I hope Daph finds Althea. I hope they're ok. I'll be fine. I just need to talk to the others here. They'll vouch for me. I know they will. I've helped solve cases for them. They know me.

It's just like the car ride over. It feels like an eternity. It’s like I’m staring at the clock in school right before the day ends and I’m about to go home. My watch! I left it in the bag! No, it’s ok! I left the bag behind. Althea should recognise it and if not Daphne will. The footsteps return from behind the door. She's coming back.

“Name?” The figure that enters steps into the light in the centre of the room. Same woman from before. She's holding a file. She stands opposite of me instead of sitting down.

“Watson.” I reply. She looks super serious. More serious than the anyone on the team ever was with me.

“Full name.” She glares at me. Alright, she is an official of some sort. Show her some respect and answer her questions. I'm not in trouble.

“Cassandra Watson.”

“Occupation?” She continues to stare at me.

“Student and freelance detective.”

“A what? Freelance detective? That being you aren't employed with the police, you're contracted? It's miraculous that anybody your age is consulted and employed in this line of work.

Nothing short of amazing.” She sarcastically remarks.

“I don't officially work for anyone. I just have a knack for finding things out.” I reply.

“A knack? What is that? You discover critical case information by luck or by accident.”

“I just happen to find things before others.”

“Elaborate for me, Ms. Watson. How does one just happen to find things sooner than others?” I wish I could explain it better than that but that's just how it is. Just like winning the bets I make, I just know where things are. I'm going to tell her seriously and she's going to think I'm crazy and have me locked up..

“I have this sort of sixth sense going on. I know things before they happen.”

“A sixth sense? As if you could build up every piece of reconstructive evidence on your own before a trained team could do it?”

“Yeah something like that.” I didn't mention reconstructing scenes but she called it out.

Now I'm a little worried. The thought of her knowing the truth is plausible now. I didn't think the situation would work out like this.

“Now a way I can think of that being possible, is that you are responsible for the crimes committed in every case. As if you were a mastermind who used good, honest, innocent people to steal attention away from you own actions. Something like that yes?” She asks.

“I wouldn't say-”

“Somehow you found the missing piece to every case you've been on despite the team consisting of perimeter security, scene processing, prosecutors, medical personnel, medical examiners, coroners, forensic examiners, evidence technicians, and fire and rescue officers? You’ve never been evaded by transient evidence, you bypassing chains of document custody and you’re an all around local hero?” I slick down into my chair and nervously laugh. All the technical terms in in her words make this sound very serious.

“I'm going to level with you Watson, despite your namesake, you are an incredibly suspicious individual.”

“I see. I'm sorry.” I reply to her.

“Why are you apologising?”

“Oh well I...thought maybe it'd be a display of my respect for those who take their jobs way too seriously.”

“Is that an attempt at humour Miss. Watson? The profound teen spirit is it?” Her tone is as serious as her question. She really asked that. Who is this fish out of water type lady? Whatever I don't need to deal with this. I'm getting out of here.

“Perhaps you don't understand the seriousness of the situation you're in. I'll explain this clearly to you. I think you're setting these crimes up and framing it on others. Unless you can prove me otherwise, you should prepare to spend the next couple of weeks here behind bars while a case is organised against you.” She continues, throwing the folder down onto the table.

“I'm not a criminal. Ask anybody here.”

“I'm asking you. Show me this sixth sense. This file contains every case you've worked on Cassandra. Prove to me you're not a crook.”

I open the file up and look over the first one. A simple mugging. I just happened to trip the guy while sticking my leg out. That's hardly… anything. I can't explain that. And the lady got all her stuff back anyways. What would I have to gain from giving her everything back? I'm not the suspicious one here. This lady is! Who the hell is she? I've never seen her before. Nobody is coming back here checking up on us. She's just been pushing me around the whole time! I have some questions I want answered!

“What's your name?” I speak up, looking down at the file. I can hear her laugh. I don't get an answer. This lady is totally suspicious! I know what it is, she beat me earlier. How did she beat me?

I never lose at my game and she beat me twice in a row! But what can I do about it? She must be somewhat coordinated with the staff here. There's no other way she could've set me up in this room.

I know. I'll do something unpredictable. Something to throw her off guard. Then when she turns her attention away from me I can run out and talk to someone else. They'll help me. They gave her a file of everything I've helped with here. I'll use the file. I'll throw it into the air and make a break for it. Yeah that'll work.

I take the file in hand and toss it into the air. The papers fly around the room and I run out of my chair and rip the door open. I step into the room in front of me in a panic, hoping to find help.

What? What on Earth is this? I'm seated back in the room I just left. The file is neatly placed on the table. The woman across from me is staring at me.

This is the same feeling from earlier. I can feel my palms getting sweaty again. It's that same trick. What happened? How? I know I opened that door up. She's just staring at me. Am I going crazy? Did I see myself do it? Did I imagine it? Ugh, thinking! I'm not going to think! Just do! I grab the file and throw it behind me and run for the door. I hit my left hand on the knob but otherwise my exit goes flawlessly.

I'm sitting at the table again. The file sits neatly in front of me. This is not right. I know I left. My hand still hurts. I rub it with my other hand. Think Cass. Something weird is going on. How do you beat it? Maybe, switch things up. What if I leap at her? What will this lady do? Only one way to find out.

I stand up out of my chair and leap over the table at her. As soon as I feel myself in the air is as quickly as I find myself seated again. Then I'm gonna do it again and again till whatever is happening stops.

I leap out of my chair again, trying to push the mystery lady out of my way. Again, I'm seated as if nothing happened. How about I mix it up a little more?

I get of the chair and throw it at her. Again, I'm seated as if I've been seated the whole time. Is she like, reversing time or something? No, it can't be reversing. My hand still hurt after I sat back down earlier. If it's not reversing then maybe it's stopping?

I get out of my chair once more, pushing the table into her. As it pushes forward I feel like something pushes me back. I'm sitting down again. The table is back in its original position. That time was different! I felt like I was being moved? Then, if I do something stupid again, will I feel it again? I take the file, open it up and pull some documents out. I tear them up and throw them at her and run for the door. She'll have to pay extra attention this time for sure. I open the door and feel something pull me back into the room. The table is in place. The folder is how it was before. The woman stands still, staring at me. This time I'm going to catch her off guard.

I open up the file and start tearing some of the paper up. I put it in my mouth get out of the chair. She's not going to remove it from my mouth, I know she won't. I head for the door one more time, leaving behind my chair and the ruined paper. I open the door and immediately find myself seated once more. This time is different though!

“The paper is still in my mouth! You're cheating too but you couldn't reverse this! I knew it” I shout in excitement. I finally got her!

“Of course its still in your mouth. I'm not putting my hand in your gross mouth. Plus, two cheaters cancel out anyways so what I'm doing is fine.” She replies.

“That's only if you multiply them not if you add them together! And I broke your little magic trick, you can't reverse this can you?”

“I can actually reverse it. I simply find more enjoyment from watching an idiot kid put paper in their mouth.”

“Oh yeah? Prove it!” I exclaim. She lifts up her right hand and snaps her fingers. The page I had torn up and put in my mouth is now sitting in my hands. No tears. The liquid mulch that was

fermenting in my mouth is gone.

“Proof enough for you Cassandra Watson.” I'm dumbfounded. She did it just as she said she would. She's incredible.

“It's more than enough. I thought I had an impressive ability but compared to you, it's nothing.”

“You have something like foresight or minor clairvoyance. The other part of your namesake. Am I right?” She asks.

“I explained it earlier. Why'd we go through all that just to get you to believe me?”

“To see if you'd realise the situation you were in. If you could understand without being told anything then it means you’re ready.”

“Wha-? So this was like a test or something?” I ask her. She nods her head. “Does that mean I pass?” I ask another question.

“You recognised the trend and even tried to prevent it from reoccurring. You pass.” She says.

“Wow. So… what now?”

“I'm Aion. Starting tomorrow, you're going to be working for me.”

“Aion? That's a strange name. What kind of work will I be doing?”

“What kind of work does a detective do, Watson?” Ah, she got me there.

“Ok but… I have school tomorrow. What are we going to do about that?” She smirks at my words.

“I'll show you what I can do about that. Just you wait and see.” She responds in her cool voice “Later Watson.” The sound of her fingers snap again and I'm standing outside, back in Central Park. Cheese sinks down the pizza slice from Daphne's face as she and Althea stare at me in total shock. Amazing. Far more amazing than anything I can do. That pretty lady is going to be my new teacher.

Reality

My eyes open up, I stare, looking out of my bed. Darkness so fierce that I can scarcely distinguish the room I'm in from my nightmares and dreams. Curiously, the cold, indifferent metallic beast was not the cradle I slumbered in this time. I don't know how to put it but, there's a familiarity in the air that surrounds me. I sit up on my butt and raise my right leg, putting my right arm on it.

It's stuffy, suffocating, enveloping my form and caressing me in place. My eyes, which by all means, be able to see in this darkness, recognise nothing. No shape or form. In the recesses of my body, my self, my truth, recognise what's hidden from the computer. I run my left hand along my bed, the most secure place in the world to be.

Even if they were dreams, there are parts of me that feel real pain. The me that feels a profound sadness. The me that feels anguishing betrayal. The me that feels plaguing emptiness. It envelops my mind, corroding it, stripping me of comfort in my own bed. A lock unlatches, the creek of wood pierces the silence within. Eyes crawl over my body, suspicion within my home.

Light slowly splits down the middle of the darkness. In the ray of hope is a running current of dust that ebbs with the flow of air. The scent of familiarity grows. This unforgettable odour. I look around the room, staring at what reflections I can. As my mind felt, it isn't my apartment, nor is it the lab. This is my office. I can see it all now. My desk, the wall of notes, my books, everything. Pictures. A new photo sits on the evidence wall. It's Daphne, Cassiel and I together. Oh, that must be the photo we took before I went to the End of Time to face off against Aion. All faces I haven't seen in forever. If I didn't know of this photo's existence, nobody does. This is proof that I should finally be awake. Kassandra told me how to end the loop of dreams. At least, I hope I'm awake. I get up

and wander into the bathroom.

I flip the light switch. I stare into my mirror. The face staring back at me doesn't feel very familiar. She looks hollow. Emotionless. But I feel otherwise. Do I know who stares back at me in the reflected world? Is it Cassandra's face? No, with this body, it's Kairos' face. Why does it show such an awful person to me? I let out a heavy sigh and pinch my cheek. I'm awake.

I turn the knob on the faucet and listen to the sound of water pouring out. I wet my hands, my face, hoping that this is real. Real. What even is real anymore? How long has it been? How long will it be?

Pain rises in my chest. I shut the water off and press my hands onto the strangling sensation. What did I see? What did I experience? What was real? What was a dream? I let off of my chest and turn the water back on. I cup it in my hands and drink. The damage from an emotional truck crashes into my heart. Aion. Yidhra. Junko. These names. These people. I saw them. They weren't real, were they? I don't know. A sinister dream that transcended space and time fills me with a horrifying combination of solitude, grotesqueness, anger, and perversion that puts a terrible sense of despair within my heart. Aion? Aion! Aion?! Aion…

I cup more water into my hands and splash my face again. I leave my hands covering my face. From my office comes the electronic sound of ringing, the phone takes my attention away. I suppose it's Chrono. Well, if this body has been recording data like he wants, then he's going to be wondering why I spent all night sleeping instead of working. Funny, the only real thing I'm doing is the where I feel most out of place. Who is staring back at me in the-

So noisy! Shut up! Some of us are trying to sleep here!

The voice previously absent from my head calls out. Telling me to... Hey, what the hell? Who are you telling to shut up? I run this castle.

You're Cassandra Watson. You're awake. You're a fake, imaginary detective for pretend that

works for a God of Time. This job is also a cover for being a God of Time yourself. Don't blame the mirror for how you look. Now stop crying and pick up the damn phone.

I drag my body out of the bathroom with my mind and reach for the phone on my desk. She has some nerve, telling me things I know about me. When I get a free moment she's going to get an earful. I lift up the phone, waiting for Chrono to speak first.

“Cassandra? Hello, anybody there? Hey, why pick up the phone if you aren't going to say anything.” This guy is such an idiot. It's almost a relief to hear this voice.

“Hey, Chrono.”

“Kairos, there you are! What were you quiet for? I know I'm everything you dream of and more but that's no reason for the cat to have your tongue.” This guy is such an idiot. Why did I pick up the phone?

“Right. Anyways what do you need Chrono? I'm still waking up.”

“I need you to stop by today. We’ve made significant headway in the investigation.” Oh, that's interesting. I wonder if the computer identified their faces. No wait, I don’t even need the computer to identify them. I know what they both look like now. For better or worse…

“Cass?” He calls my name.

“Oh sorry, still waking up and all that.” I reply.

“Just come by when you're ready. How was the mini vacation? I’m sure you got plenty of rest.” Vacation? I have no damn idea how it's going. Did I get time off? I feel like I've been watching some really horrible things recently. I don't know if I've been sleeping or dreaming or if everything I saw and heard and felt was real. That sequence did some real mental damage to me.

“You have some new info regarding the case?” I ask.

“More than that, we're about to bust the case right open because I've identified the warped faces in the photo.” He replies. As I thought. I wonder if it’s because of my encounter with them that

suddenly made them appear on the machine.

“Then everything should fall into place right? We're almost done.” I reply.

“Exactly. I have all the info you need to complete this case.” He finishes speaking, spurring me into a sense of action. He has all the info I need to complete this? What about Aion? Something shady is going on here. If he won’t tell me I know who will. I need to see the Morrigan and the girls again. Find out if they know anything about Aion.

“Hey Chrono?”

“What is it Cass, need something else?”

“How are the girls? I haven't had time to stop by and see them.”

“You mean the Ministry ladies?”

“Yeah. Are they well?”

“Yeah. They're all fans of drinking and participating in seasonal merriment.”

“Seasonal merriment? Have they been visiting Earth? Or maybe Aion?”

“No, they’re at the Castle. I guess they just enjoy the holiday spirit. If they're not in the library together then they're sleeping. They didn't exactly have a whole lot left to do after you and Aion brought them back.”

“I see. That's good. Glad they’re enjoying retirement.” I reply.

“Ahaha, retirement? I hadn't thought of it like that but I suppose you are correct.”

“And Aion?” I ask.

“Well you know she's never around. If I had seen or felt her return, I would've had a chat with her.”

“Right. I guess I got lucky seeing her.”

“Indeed, you're lucky she let you. Now, is there anything left or are you ready to come over?”

“I'll get ready. Don't expect me too quickly though.” I set the phone back into place, ending the

call.

Lucky huh? I'm lucky this woman I've committed no small part of my life to let me see her? This woman who sees other women. Not even behind my back, she invites me to see her with them?

You need someone who will give you more commitment Cass.

What? Why are you here I thought you said you were going to sleep.

Something wicked comes this way.

A knock hits my door, taking my focus away from her. I'd prefer Daphne because that'd be an easier conversation. If it's Althea I'm going to be grilled. I haven't spoken to either of them in awhile. Not since Chrono invited everyone together after that whole thing with AO. I reach for the door and pull it open. There she is, grimoire in hand.

“Hey.” I say and wave to her. I stand to the side and hold my arm out for her, welcoming her in.

“Good Morning, Cassandra.” She walks in and takes the seat in front of my desk. I follow, grabbing my seat at the other side of my desk.

“So Cass, want to get into what mess you've found yourself in this time?” Her gaze is intense. It's not like I've done anything wrong here.

“Althea, it’s just some weird monster. I'm taking care of it. I've got it handled.” Her serious expression doesn't change.

“People who have things handled don't show up half dead on my doorstep and sleep for fourty-eight hours straight Cass.” Two days? And I ended up here? So those were dreams. Was my body was doing something else? Did Kassandra bring me here?

“Well, I already have some what of an idea of what has been going on. Anything from your side you'd like to tell me?” She further inquires.

“My side? I can't even tell you where it begins Althea. One second, I'm returning home then next I'm buying a vinyl and record player. Another dream I'm alone in a train station full of bizarrely

shaped monsters. There's one where I'm watching…" I stop myself from finishing that sentence. What I had saw, watched, that wasn't real. Right? There's no way she would do that to me. They were dreams. All of them.

"Dreams?" She pauses. Rubbing her chin with her hand, she sighs. "Then perhaps what Nyarlathotep told me is the truth. You're investigating another Cosmic Beast. Nyarlathotep didn't seem to care too much about this creature though. Life forms below them don't interest them, you know how it is." I slightly smile and find myself agreeing. That's how Kass is.

"She's known as Yidhra, The Dream Witch. I've never personally encountered her. Not like we have a hub to meet up and chat at. We hardly ever encounter each other in the vastness of space. I've heard things though, whispers from those who cross her. I do imagine an opponent who can so readily intermix dreams and reality would be a challenge, even for someone like me."

"Even for you, Althea?"

"It's not like we're all keen on each other's secrets you know." I guess she's right. Why would any of them be similar to one another? Well, thoughts for later. It's time to go.

"Thanks for the info. If you don't mind, I have to go check in with Chrono now so, see you later I guess."

"You're just gonna go back and act like everything is ok? Are you aware you've been stuck in her dream loop for the past two days?" She asks.

"I have to go back. I need to solve this case. I need to go. I have to fix this. It's my job."

"You have to do all of that on your own? Nobody else can help you?"

"Look, I appreciate you looking out for me but I'm not the person you're friends with. I just look like her."

"Why on Earth would you say that?"

"I…I'm ...I don't know. I'm no longer Cassandra Watson. I'm Kairos. It's my job to take care of

things like this.”

“You think just because someone told you a different name you're no longer Cass?” She says. I don’t know. I don’t know what to do or say or think or feel. I don’t know how to be me.

“I'm afraid.” I confess to her.

“Of what?” She replies.

“Of talking to you guys. Reaching out. Afraid none of you would like me. The me I've become. The me I was made to be. Kairos… and not even the best. A second rate Kairos…”

“What kind of nonsense are you saying Cass? I’ve been there for you since you started.”

“Why? Why are you ok with it and I'm not?!”

“Well, I guess a name doesn't mean that much to me. It's the person behind that name. That's what I care about. Who cares about Kairos? Second rate? Balderdash! Why do you want to be this Kairos when you’re a first rate Cassandra Watson!? ” She finishes speaking. She’s… she’s right. That’s… Me. I’m her. Wow. If anything… that’s the nicest thing I’ve probably ever been told. But…

“Just like that? None of it matters?” I ask.

“I can't say whether or not it matters to you. I can only say for myself, it's fine. If I had known the reason you weren't visiting was so trivial I would've brought you here myself.”

“Althea…”

“Now are you going to keep getting into your own head or are we going to get this done Cass?” Yeah. Yeah, she's right. I'm an idiot. I was avoiding everyone so much but what I was really avoiding was responsibility. I’m avoiding myself. I’m avoiding Aion. I’m not going to avoid things anymore. I’m Kairos. I’m Watson. I’m me. We’re, Cassandra Watson!

“Let’s... do this. I think I understand a little of what you're saying. I'm not saying that I'll be 100% or perfect but I feel like a weight has been lifted off of my shoulders.”

“I'm not asking for perfection, I’m asking for Cassandra Watson. I'm asking you to keep being

you.” I nod at her. There's a spark in my chest. The pain is gone. I’m energised, excited.

“Good, I can see life return to your eyes. Now let's start from the top. When it comes to creatures like us, there's always some sort of trigger for our powers to work. Something to trick your unaware mind into a trap. Whether it’s the faint sound of mice in your walls or texts you should never lay eyes on, the first thing you need do is find out what the trigger is. From what Nyarlathotep told me, it seems like it coincides with the time you left the Suitomo building the other day.” A trigger activates Yidhra's trick? And it coincides with leaving the building?

“What if I avoid the trigger all together? If it is tied to the building then I’ll stay inside.”

“Like you go back in time and stop yourself from exiting?” She asks.

“Something like that. What do you think?” I ask back.

“Hmm… avoiding the trigger...” Althea says, cupping her chin with her hand in thought.

“She can't wait forever out there for me.” I lean on my desk and motion at her.

“But you can't wait inside forever either.” Althea's words are true, my needs will eventually drive me outside of the building. When I end my shift I will cross into the other world. Perhaps I should take advantage of this information. Yeah, that's right. I've been approaching this situation the wrong way all this time. Why am I all of a sudden, doing things so by the books?

“Althea, when an ability on this scale is cast, does the user have to follow some sort of rules or are there any restrictions?”

“Rules? I suppose as The Dream Witch, she’s not limited by any conventional logic. If anything, she may be limited by simply having all of her focus on you. This could lead to gaps of focus among others but she's probably not concerned with others. Especially if she's not alone.” Then she has nothing to worry about because she works with Junko. That's how she gets away with everything. Junko is the body and she the shadow.

“We know I'm the target of her focus but what about a second me?” I ask. Why did I let myself

be ordered around so much before. Why was I behaving like that? How long have I been behaving like that? Chrono might have something to do with all of this. Of course he does. He's proven himself to be a shady character time and time again..

"A second you? You mean by going back in time at the same time you're leaving the building?"

"I think it's time to stop playing fair, Althea." Manipulation isn't just on my enemy's side. It's *our* specialty too.

"What do you mean Cass?"

"Every opponent I've beaten so far I've cheated against."

"Right."

"I think it's time to return to that strategy. Start doing the unexpected again." I shoot her a cheeky glance.

"The Cassandra way. I see. Something like going to the future despite being instructed not to." She fires a smirk back at me.

"Exactly. I'm going to give Yidhra exactly what she wants. A clueless, stressed out, tired detective, ripe for the taking."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to beat her at her own game. Not just beat her, I'm going to make her quit. Losing won't be enough, I'm going to make sure she's finished."

"That's a bold statement Cass. Did you get that attitude from Nyarlathotep?"

"Nyarlathotep? Was she, they, the one that brought me here?"

"Yeah. Never did I imagine that was how I was going to encounter them again. Especially considering our previous meeting." Althea remarks.

"I don't know how well you two get along but for this case, I need you both to cooperate." Althea eyes me curiously at the end of my question.

“What's your plan Cass?”

“Kassandra is going to cover for me in the Dream while I take Yidhra down in the real world.”

“Oh? And how will you coexist as two bodies at the same time? I’m certain Yidhra will notice magical interference.” She asks. Curiosity and intrigue sit upon her face.

“A magician never reveals their secrets!” I declare. Althea must’ve thought it funny as she starts to laugh. She gets up from my chair.

“Very well. Consider me curious. I'd like to see the magic of a being who has survived cosmic possession and lived to tell the tale. I believe in you Cass. Count me in.” She wanders out into the hall and slowly fades into black. I need to get back to the lab to pull of the most grand trick in the entire universe. I shut my eyes and snap my fingers.

“Legendary Illusion: Changeability of Nightmares.”

After the Rain

“What took you so long?” His voice calls out to me as soon as I arrive. The lab is a little less empty, thanks to my arrival.

“I was busy, that's all.” I respond quickly to him.

“Busy? Do you need another day's worth of sleep? C’mon, let's get started.”

“Right, so what did you find out Chrono? The evidence finally have some use?” He smiles brightly and reaches for one of the folders laid out on the desk. He hands it to me, motioning to open it up.

I do as instructed, opening it up and digging in to look. If it’s photos of their faces, I need to pretend this is the first time I've seen their faces. I don't want to divulge that they were revealed to me in a dream. That's not exactly a good source and furthermore, he's not exactly on my side. We just have converging goals. I lift the photos up and stare at them, exactly as I had seen them. Junko, the girl I had helped out in the rain after her murder spree and Yidhra, the monster behind the scenes. I audibly gasp and drop the folder.

“Bloody hell Cass, take better care of the evidence will you?” He says. I awkwardly laugh, crouching down to pick everything up. That'll do for the first part of my performance.

“Now for one, I'd like you to get these photos to Cassidy. This will get the case moving forward. His team has a machine that can further identify them if they've shown their faces in public over the past 60 years.” He tells me as his focus shifts to the computer he's sitting at.

“This is some pretty damning evidence Chrono, these are clear photos of them. What else could we need?” I ask him.

“Well, Cassidy needs to follow the law of the land to get our human perpetrator. We have to get

an undeniable amount of hard evidence against her. You will help him get whatever he needs, if you need to time travel to get more evidence, do it. I couldn't help but notice you hardly did while you were there. Something preventing you from doing so?" I shut the folder and hold on to it. Cassidy will take care of Junko. I will deal with Yidhra.

"No, I thought the case would be easier than this, that's all. I'll deliver this to him. Before that though, would you take me to Morrigan and the others? I'd like to catch up a little." I hope he lets me do this. Underneath the shadows of the room hides the other half of my self. She awaits the moment to follow my instruction.

"Catch up? Why are you asking for my permission? If you want to see them then go."

"You get there faster..." I bashfully dig my right shoe into the ground.

"It's like a tenth of a second, you can do it." He says to the frown I'm faking on my face. I bat my eyes at him and exaggerate a sniffle in my nose. He sighs and waves me over to him.

"Thanks Chrono, you're the best." This guy… Hook, line and sinker.

"Yeah, I know. But after this you get back to work alright? Cassidy needs the evidence before anything else can progress." I nod and he takes me to Tintagel. We immediately run into Morrigan and Eris. Morrigan is carrying a tray with a tea pot and snacks on top.

"Oh my goodness is that Cassandra and Chrono!?" Eris runs up to both of us, her eyes bright and her energy infectious.

"Cass wants to see you and I've brought her here to do so." Chrono says.

I wave at the two and make eye contact with Morrigan. I tilt my head a little towards Chrono, my eyes do the same. Fortunately, Morrigan picks up on this and walks over to Chrono. Perfect.

"Well thank you for bringing Cass to us Chrono. Come, join us in the library for tea. Cass, would you go up and get Ceres for us? She was in Aion's lobby last I saw her." Morrigan says to us. Eris grabs Chrono's arm and drags him into the library. That's exactly what I needed, thanks Morrigan. I

snap my fingers, traveling to Atlantis.

“That was quick.” Althea remarks. I snap my fingers, bringing us both to the medical bay in the lab. Encased in a treatment pod is my real body. This place is still the same dim, dark room as it was when I first woke up in it.

“Course it was fast! Could you take the me in there back to Atlantis? ” I remark to Althea. I point to my pod. Sure enough, I walk out of it. How insane is it that I'm watching myself do things with my body outside of my body in my body. My former self. The version of me that she recorded for a thousand years. My long black hair, shorter height, goodness. I was just a kid back then. She smiles at me with her bunny eared fingers pointed up.

“Sure. It'll take a bit to cast the spell. How long will he be away?” She asks me.

“The girls will keep him occupied. I wouldn't say get comfortable but we have a bit of time. Do it in five minutes.” I tell her. Kassandra walks around the room, stretching my body, getting used to it again.

Althea starts drawing on the floor. It’s a circle with all sorts of designs on it. I'm still not familiar with any of it but it's what she did before, we're just doing it in reverse this time.

“Fortunately, this place is drenched in mana. Shouldn't be more than a minute.” Althea remarks.

“Good. When we arrive back at Atlantis, transfer my soul back into my body.”

“And the body you're in right now?”

“I'm sure Kass over here can manage possessing a doll.” I look over at her and smile. Althea claps her hands together and the circle begins glowing.

“Step inside for me.” I extend my arm out to her. Kassandra does as instructed. I feel conflicted about handling myself like this but I guess it's the norm for me now. Doing weird things like this often enough makes them not weird.

“I see. Interesting use of magic Althea.” That's the first thing Kass has said since getting up. It

sounds somewhat ominous.

“Save your praise for later, we gotta go. See you in your office then?” Althea asks me.

“Yeah, see you there.” I finish speaking and her magic starts working. I watch the two vanish into thin air. Even with the splendour of mana here, I’m surprised she did it so quickly. When she sent me to a parallel universe it took her a week to gather enough mana. I'm not the only one getting stronger. I'm glad. Glad I can rely on her, even now. I exit the room to cross the bridge into the computer room and wait for Chrono's return. I sit in his chair and stare at the monitors of information. How far I've come since that day. Waking up terrified, having to deal with another voice in my head.

“Couldn't help but notice you weren't around for the tea party.” Chrono’s voice travels through my head.

“I forgot to bring the file with me so I came back.”

“You forgot to bring the file? You can't possibly think I'd fall for that.” He smirks, shrugging his shoulders.

“You're right. What’s the point of lying here? I came to take my body back.” The expression on his face breaks from the cool facade that he's always putting on.

“I'm completing the rest of this case on my own. I'm not working for you nor Aion anymore. There will be no more blindly dragging Kairos through the darkness and experimenting on them. If you have a problem with that, we can take care of it. Right here. Right now.” I stand up out of the chair, summoning a blade in my left hand.

He takes a deep breath and sighs heavily. The air is tense, the pressure is immense. But I'm not afraid. I'm big enough to make my own decisions now.

Chrono throws his hands up into the air. “I'm not the fighting type. Do what you want with your new found freedom Kairos. Just don't come to regret it.” He vanishes before my eyes. I'll take that

as his blessing. Even if it sounds forced. I take a deep breath and let my sword vanish similarly. Alright, this might actually all work out in the end. I snap my fingers, returning to Althea.

“Body theft complete?” Althea asks.

“It's not theft, it was my own body. He theft me! I didn't consent to that body swap!” I raise my fingers in a peace sign. We definitely won that exchange. I take a seat at my desk and look at the other two.

“Well, why do you think he did it? What for?”

“To keep an eye on me. No not on me, on Kairos. He was never interested in me.”

“I’m plenty interested in you, my dear Cassandra, if that's any consolation.” Kass chimes in. Unfortunately, it doesn't console me very much. Althea is fawning over the girl that’s possessing my body.

“So, what's the verdict? Can we swap between each other? She takes the mechanical body and I get the human one?” I ask, getting out of my chair and looking over “myself.”

“Should be a simple enough task. I return you to your body and Kass here gets the doll. Everybody wins.”

“Except me. I don't win. I’m stuck to your form whether I like it or not. I can't control time like you either Cassandra!”

“I have that covered, just go along with it. Please?” I plead with myself.

“Yeah yeah. Let's get this swap over with. I trust you know what you're doing.”

“Alright, Cass close your eyes. I'm going to spirit your soul away and back into your real body. It should be instantaneous. Curiously enough, you’ll appear just like your younger self did the day you left Atlantis. Kass’ magic here seems to de-age you with her possession so keep that in mind. It probably wasn’t as noticeable before but since you’re older now…well… I shouldn’t have to explain the rest.” I follow her instructions. Shutting my eyes is a simple enough task. I don't know

what this is supposed to feel like. Or if I'm supposed to feel anything. I've never been conscious while the process has happened but-

"I'd say that was flawless. Better than flawless. Absolutely perfect" Althea cackles. I take it our experiment is successful.

"Now Kass, go into the shell that Cass left and we can get things started." My office grows dark for a moment, the shadow without form envelops the body I left. She shakes her head left to right, staring down at her hands. Opening and closing them. Now I'm actively participating in the horror that once gripped me.

"What happened with Chrono?" My voice calls out and asks me. The woman from the mirror. The woman with a heart shattered over and over again. She looks like she needs a hug.

"He won't be a problem. Although he did give me something. I'm sure you've already seen their faces in my memories but just in case, check your coat pocket." She reaches into her jacket and pulls a folder out. In her hands is the evidence Chrono gave me. "That's for Cassidy. He'll use it to bring Junko to justice. We'll handle Yidhra."

"That's good. Things are working in our favour. In fact, this is working out almost too perfectly. You're a dangerous person when your mind is set to something. Now you'll really have to call me big sister." Kass trails off into laughter, holding the folder out toward me. I open my hand, and take it from her. I look at Althea and she smiles.

"Althea, Kass I'm going to send you both back in time. You'll be returned to the night I leave the Suitomo building and fall into Yidhra's trap. Althea, you need to trick the me that's leaving work to delay long enough for Kass. Kass, you need to leave the building in her place and fall under the Dream Witch's spell. Althea will place a magical ward on you to keep you safe from the effects of my time magic. She'll fall right into our trap. After I feel it's been long enough, we'll break her, all together. Now let's get ready for our places." My explanation ends and I smile at myself. Something

is finally going my way.

"You look better when you smile Miss. Watson." The woman across from me says while smiling herself.

"Indeed she does my faithful servant. Now play a performance worthy of our names!" Althea says. She casts her hand out and a circle appears underneath the other me, slowly traveling over her body. Althea turns to me and nods. It's time.

I snap my fingers, sending the decoy Kassandra back in time. Now it's my turn to fulfil actions requested of me. I stuff the envelope in my coat pocket and sit back down at my desk.

"This whole thing is contingent on Aion not interfering. I'm a little shocked you're betting against her Cass." I stare at a mountain of files, cases I've worked completed with Aion for years. The culmination of my experience is 10 or so years now. The culmination of Kairos' experience however is almost equal to Aion's. Everything AO said…

"Here, now, after it all, I've come to realise something. It's not about acting contrary to the universe. It's about acting how the universe expects me to. Not those two. I won't be a guinea pig for them anymore. I can't do anything else that disrupts the balance, I'm already a walking agent of chaos." I express to her. "I'm sorry the first thing I ask after these past couple years from you is work. I know I've been gone and I haven't reached out and... and for being a bad friend. Apologise to Daph for me too." I stand up out of my chair. I can feel my throat tighten and my eyes water. What have I been doing lately?

I can feel arms wrap around me and embrace me. I hesitate, maybe I shouldn't hug her back. What have I done to deserve compassion?

"Cass?" Her voice calls out to me. She lifts her face upwards, smiling gently at me. "When you're ready, you're welcome back. Always." I wrap her with my arms. A warm feeling grows in my chest. I am capable of returning these feelings. I've always been able to, it's only in my own head

that I'm not.

“Thanks Althea. I'll be back. For real this time.” We break from our hug. I step back and point my left hand out towards her, my index and middle finger raised with the others hidden in my palm. She shoots it back at me. I snap my fingers, destination Tokyo.

As quick as it starts it ends. I'm back in the lobby of Suitomo building. Everything looks the same. I can see Cassidy’s crew hard at work as usual. Even if it's New Year's Eve. Well, not like crime takes a break. Staring over the various employees, I search for my contact. I put my hand in my pocket and pull out the envelope Chrono gave me. Out of the corner of my eye I spy the man I'm looking for. He's walking out of the bathroom. Maybe I should give him a second. I walk over to the computer area ahead of him, putting a bit of breathing room between us. There's no way he didn't see me thought. I spin around and wave at him.

“Hey Cassidy, how's the case going? Anything new come up?”

“Oh, Cassandra! Quite the timing you have! We did get some news from one of our sources. They reported that a woman in a kimono fainted in the street the other night. I'm having it looked into at the moment.” Oh, Junko. She's related to the monster but why? From what I could tell she was a regular human. Maybe less than regular, she looked so sickly. Their faces. The faces of the two who have been tormenting me the entire time. I know what they look like.

“Someone fainted?! Where was it at?!” I ask.

“Not too far from where you live actually.”

“No kidding? Any additional information?”

“One of our cameras picked her up at 2:40am. She falls, perhaps a little too much to drink and the rain was of no help to her. Although she is rather far away from the Suitomo building, she is assisted by something at 3:15am.” Something? Oh shit, did they see me? No, it’s fine. Let him continue explaining.

“What do you mean something, Cassidy?”

“The figure on the camera is the same as the blurred faces on the photos. Well more than blurred, their entire form is hazy, seemingly impossible to identify their entire person.” Is that how I appear? I can't be identified because I had Nyarlathotep at the time. There indeed was a monster out that night. This should be fine, I don’t even look like *that* person anymore. Cassidy hasn’t commented on it though. Hmm, maybe he thinks its simply a part of the investigation and not worth bringing up.

“Well, let's not have the blur stop us any longer. I have their identities here.” I hand the folder to him. He opens it up and stares at the photos for a moment before waving someone over and handing the evidence to them. They run off to a computer and it looks like they're inserting the photo's into some sort of machine.

“Indeed you have come at a perfect time Cass. You may have just shut this case for us!” He exclaims. Can he get really get that much information from a single photo? That’s really impressive.

“Shut the case? What do you mean by that, Cassidy?”

“The system has a database on every citizen in the country for the past 60 years. Basically, if they existed any point during the 20th century, there's a file on them. It also includes visitors such as tourists, even war time era soldiers and the last remnants of the Daimyo and Kuge.” Just like Chrono said. “The photos will find the closest match among citizens as well as all relevant information. This is what I mean by shutting the case. You just found the people we've been looking for.” Hmm, I can't imagine Yidhra will show up in their files. Perhaps if she was possessing a body of a Japanese citizen.

“How long does it take?” I ask, looking back at the fellow who's running the search. “Shouldn't be long at all. A few minutes at most. Eager to catch them are you?” His question is strange. Or perhaps it's my answer that will be strange. I don't exactly want to catch them at the moment but I would like to find them. Based on how I've interacted with them so far, I can't assume they'll even

be together. It would be nice though.

“Ah well you know, it'd be good to close the case and to keep the public safe from them.” I give him a very phoned in answer. I do want the murders to stop and I can stop them before they happen again but there’s something…

“Indeed. On an unrelated note, I'm glad to see you're doing better. Your face has a bit more colour in it Cass. Must've been a real nasty cold to take you out for a couple days like that.” Cold? Yeah, I was sick alright.

“Thanks. I hope that wasn't too much of a bother.” He looks at me very confused. Did I say something wrong?

“A bother? For falling ill? It was no bother at all. Chrono handled things for you. We even got a rare appearance from Aion. If anything, I'm surprised you've returned to finish the case.” Something is off about this but I don't think it's going to detract from the greater plan. Everything is still in motion. If Aion had showed up to help though… no. I'm not going to worry about her.

“Right. Well, thanks for you know, working with me and all that.” He smiles at me and I smile back. Cassidy leaves, meeting up with some members of his team. They salute him and turn their attention back to their computers, doing whatever it is they need to. He shoots me a thumbs up and I send one back. I suppose I can just sit in the lobby and wait for the data to process.

I spy a vacant leather couch so I take a seat in it. My thoughts travel far and in between as I wait. I haven't properly talked to Aion yet. I guess I should try before facing Yidhra. An eldritch god has taken interest in me, or well, a another one has. But what would Aion do for me? Or rather, what wouldn't she do for me? If she had shown up to help then that means she's on our side. Footsteps approach me and I spy a folder full of new information in Cassidy's hands.

“To continue our talk from a moment ago, the information on the two girls in the photos is ready. We've completed the search on them as well as full background checks.” He holds the folder out for

me.

“Sure, I'll take a look. I'm surprised you got any info back at all.” I guess that means Junko and Yidhra both are Japanese citizens. How Yidhra has a file though is almost baffling but I have a slight idea as to why.

“I think the real surprise is what you'll be reading about Cass. This is the reason why you were sent her to take care of the case.” I take the folder and open it up. The first is a youthful looking Japanese woman. Nazono Junko. Born January 1, 1971. Her birthday is tomorrow.

Below that date is something even more interesting. Death by murder, January 1, 1989. Fucking hell, on her own birthday? She was just a kid, hardly older than myself when I started. That must be why she looks the way she does.

Further down is information on the schools she went to, her Kendo club accolades, a couple of tournament victories under her belt. Further down is all related family information. She's local to the Tokyo metro area. Fate can be a cruel thing. But if Junko died, who was I talking to when we met? When she was with Aion? I suppose that information will come from the second file.

I pull out the page from behind to read over Yidhra's file and get a look at who Yidhra appears to be. I suspected this in the back of my mind, having had experience with her in the dream from before. Aside from her hairstyle being different, everything on her file the same as the first one, word for word. Both photos recognise the person as Junko.

“Thank you for this Cassidy..”

“Cassandra, if I may. Our independent investigation of the Ministries across Japan have yielded their own interesting results. I feel like you may be what we need for another breakthrough.” He smiles at me and makes a V with his right hand.

“As you no doubt have seen, Ms. Nazono died almost 10 years ago. We dug up the case and found a couple of the people responsible for her death have small relations with the cult. I had an

underground officer try to meet with the men but it seems their information is fabricated and purposely made obtuse to discover what and why."

"An undercover cop?"

"Although Nazono Junko herself is deceased, she's also our current culprit. There's something about her murder case doesn't sit well with me. Would you perhaps take on a small request of mine to gather some additional information?" He rubs under his nose with his finger.

"Oh, yeah. That's fine. What do you have in mind?"

"Cassandra, I want you to take care of Nazono and her apparent body double. This won't be as on the record as the rest of our investigation. As you know, the legal side of reality is my job. The supernatural side is yours. I'm having their last seen locations traced. The cameras of the city are our eyes." I nod at him as he finishes speaking. I feel like he's about to ask me to do something off of the books. It sounds like technology here mirrors the abilities of our monster friends. I wonder how much of it comes from Chrono's successful experiments on Nyarlathotep, AO and myself.

"I can do that for you Cassidy. It's why I'm here." I reply.

A man approaches Cassidy with another folder. I'm sure with the exact information he was just talking about.

"The construction of the underground flood tunnels, do you know anything about them Cass?"

"Hmm the ones in Tokyo? I've heard about them on the news. They're still being built off in some far edge of town right?"

"Correct. Of the top of my head, I know construction has been going on for almost eight years now and I believe they were estimated to be finished somewhere in between the ninth and tenth year. There are photos of Nazono in the area as of this morning. I'd like you to confirm this for us. If she's there, do what you must." He hands me the folder. I open it up to tons of official looking documents describing the tunnels.

The underground flood tunnel project is engineered by the Japan Institute of Wastewater Engineering and Technology. A public company that collaborates with the government, major industry players and even academics. Doesn't look like there are any ties to gang related activity. Their record looks clean. The entrance to the tunnels can be accessed in Kasukabe, Saitama but not to the general public in any way, shape or form.

"I can get you clearance to enter the tunnels." He says.

"No, that might alert whoever is there. I'll go in on my own. We don't know how deep into the ranks of city officials these two are." I browse further through the folder. Another image of Junko is at an apartment complex. Looks like that's her home.

"If you do go at it alone, we'll have a hard time covering for a foreigner who entered on their own if things go south. Sensitive nature of these things I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about a thing Cass! You can read all about it in the report I'll be bringing you tomorrow." I reply. He nods at me and smiles. Holding out his hand expectantly, I return the folder of info to him.

"Cass… Hah hah hah. No one has referred to me as such in a very, long time. But that's a story for another day." He turns around and starts walking back to his team.

"Chrono sent you here in his stead, I trust you. If he believes you are a fit for the job I back his decision 100%. Just, try not to get caught ok? Like I said, covering for a trespasser in a restricted area is one thing but being foreigner on top of it?" He throws his hands into the air and sighs. "They'll throw everything in the books at you to make an example of you. Go alongside the Edogawa River, you'll find your way in. I believe the Minami Sakurai Station will bring you the closest. Use public transport so we can keep a connection with you. If anything goes wrong, I'll have a team ready to try and diffuse the situation."

"I've never been caught in my entire life, I won't be starting here. Thanks!" I return his smile and

laugh for a second. This is nice. I exit the building and make my way to my next destination.

Down the crowded streets of the city, I stare at the high rise buildings that partially block my view of the sky. The sun is on it’s downturn in the sky. These last couple hours of daylight keep the world safe. This detour will work out. New Year's Eve is pretty busy, everyone is getting everything they need before everything closes for New Years. Maybe I should grab some stuff myself. No, I'd rather relax with Althea and Daphne after finishing this. Hopefully everything will work out.

The further down the street I go, the thinner the crowd becomes. This area is special. Of course it's special. She wouldn't live around anything but special things. The sign of the cafe comes into view. She's not there today. I don't really know why I'm walking up here. Why I'm going back to this place. Maybe I just want closure. Maybe I don't want anything. Maybe I just want to see if she's home right now.

Deeper into the neighbourhood I delve. This part of town is significantly more quite than the areas before it. The road up to the residence is private. The only people that travel up this way live here. The only people that live here are the types glued to work, often traveling to other countries and own similar types of homes overseas. Executive types. And then there's Aion. Not that she doesn't belong here. This is the palace you'd expect a God to own. Extravagance upon extravagance. Not like it's her only one on Earth or even this time period for that matter. But to me, it’s the only one that means anything.

The final stretch of road up to her home is the longest. It goes up a large hill. We shared a moment out here together, right in the middle of it. I look out to the right, the view contains of all of Tokyo. It was a great view back then. It's a great view, even now.

I look back down the path I walked, it's so long. What an incredibly long walk. Aion is everything I wanted to be. The only person I ever wanted to make proud. The only person I've fallen in love with. The only person who knows all of my secrets. All of my accomplishments and failures.

All I ever wanted, all I ever needed, was here. I step into the entryway of the house.

The door isn’t locked. It's never locked. She never has anything to hide away from the world nor is there anything for the world to take away. A problem is easier to solve when you know where it lies huh.

Last Goodbye

I push into the living room, going down the hall and to her room. I open the door to nothing. Of course she's not here. She's never here. I go deeper into the room. The closet full of clothing that she never wore. Clothes from the finest designers and brands. The fiscal sum of this thing could rival a small town.

She bought some for me too of course. I'd wear it when I could. It used to captivate me so. Now that I look at them lined across the closet it makes me feel like she just played with me. Like I was a doll to dress up and show off. That kimono she got me… I was so happy to wear it. To look like her. To share something with her. Some of our more personal items are down below. Outfits for special occasions. Lace bodysuits and rompers. Satin robes and sheer corsets.

Ring Ring

Ring Ring

That sound is coming from the living room. The phone is ringing? I gather the clothes and take them with me. The phone is on a small table by a couch. I pick it up and listen for whoever is on the other line.

"Chrono told me all about this case. Why aren't you back at your place?"

"I'm working."

"There's no work to be done, I'm going to take care of it. Go home."

"I'm working. When I finish, I'll go home."

"Stop working. This isn't a negotiation, Watson."

"..."

"Say something. Talk to me, Cassandra."

“You and Chrono have been lying to me the whole time haven't you?”

“What do you mean?”

“This isn't about the case. This is about you two working against me.”

“I don’t know what you mean, Cassandra.”

“You know exactly what I mean, Aion. You want to talk, let’s talk. Let’s talk about everything”

“Everything?”

“Everything, Aion. The universe AO came from, the friendship *that* Aion and Morrigan had. Kairos. I didn't just hear about it, I fucking lived it. Experienced it. Everything she learned, saw and felt.” Aion doesn’t immediately reply. I hear her take an exhaustingly deep breath.

“We couldn't just drop you into Kairos’ position. When you beat me and proved the experiment a success, we had to slowly lead you in to your role. Get you used to things first.” She speaks up.

“Lead me in? You two were training me to life as someone else and that's all you can think of?”

“It was to protect you.”

“Protect me? My life has been a shit show since waking up in that lab. One gut punch after another. Where were you when I was dragged away into the darkness? When I woke up alone in the lab? When Chrono took over your job for me? When I was at my absolute lowest, lost and alone and on the verge of breaking! Nowhere! But it’s ok cause Cass does everything! Every day, I wake up and I pretend I’m ok. That I'm going to make it to the next day and the one after that. It’s the great lie of life! Nobody asks me how I’m doing! Nobody checks in on me! I help everyone out, but nobody helps me! I guess I should be grateful I have my own independent thoughts. I'm sure I'm different from the original version of Kairos that you wanted to save.”

“I… ”

“What's it all for Aion? So the next psycho can show up and ruin everything?”

“Is that not why you stopped me? If you can’t try for yourself then try for me. Don’t die. Try and

live and be happy. For me.”

“Ridiculous… You don't even understand the pain of life and you want me to live for you?”

“Just come back, Cass. You feel it too. I know you do. Everyday this indescribable feeling of wanting to be held. That we gave each other meaning! That we're more than our titles. We're more than ghosts in the machine. I don't want to lose you again.”

“You know how this ends. You've always known Aion. This is the tragedy of a long life you wanted to avoid.”

“I don’t… I can't see everything when it comes to you Cass. I'll admit it, ok? We tricked you. Chrono and I made you play along. I didn't want another Kairos to die. Kairos has a limited lifespan, doomed to live and die an infinite amount of times in the cycle. I thought enough was enough. You say I don't understand the pain of life? You don't understand the pain of loss!”

“I… ” I trail off in silence. I have no rebuttal for that. How could I? I'm not… It’s not my fault…

“You don't need to do this. Cass? Just come home. Please. I'll handle it. Chrono will handle it. His team will handle it. Your job is done. You don't need to prove anything to anybody. We can talk about this. We can talk about everything.”

“I know we're not exactly the best at this but I'd like to think we're kind and caring all the same. It's unique, how you treat me and how I treat you. I felt seen. I hope you felt seen as well. Out of every single possibility in the universe, we met again. For a brief moment in time, it's something we shared and I think that's beautiful. If we never met again I would be content because you've given me more than I have ever deserved.”

“Cass? What are you saying?” Worry and fear strain her voice. I don't think I've heard Aion cry before and I'm sorry for making her do so now.

“I'm already home Aion but…

It's empty.”

“Wh-what? Wait! Wait! Cass I'll be ri-” I press the phone down on the switch, ending the call. I look back over the living room, the door to the balcony. Memories. All of my our memories together. Memories that transcend time and space, the future and past. Long ago and far away.

I speed up my actions, quickly exiting before she can stop time and find me. I sprint down the now dark streets of the city and make my way into a alley. It's still semi-busy out, a few of the izakaya are opening up and already serving guests. The atmosphere is heavy with the smell of cooked meat and alcohol. Aion won’t detect me if I only modify the flow of my actions, not time itself. And her not showing up in front of me right now tells me that's the case. ***No turning back now.***

I go underground to catch the next train to Saitama. I grab my ticket and have it checked at the turnstile and make my way through the concrete maze for my trip. The schedule shows the trip will take an hour. I'm not sure if making the train move faster will work the same as speeding up my own movement. I'm not going to risk it either. This train would eventually hit another train if it was the only one sped up. I'd need to speed up all of time but the second I do that, Aion finds me.

My train stops at the platform and I step inside, standing in place and holding one of the hanging straps from above. The further we get from Tokyo, the emptier the train becomes. Well, the big city is bound to get all the foot traffic for the holiday. Doesn’t look like I’ll have any letter shaped visitors this time. That’s good. They were sort of cute looking though.

What if I stayed and talked to her in person… Would we have left together? What would she have done? It felt good letting some of my pent up feelings out but the plan requires me and only me. Aion is not a part of this. Things need to go according to the plan. She admitted to her wrong doing. Hiding the fact that I was Kairos from me. To protect me? Lying to me was keeping me safe? Was pretending to be someone I wasn't was that preferable to being Kairos? This is complicated. All of it. For all of us. For me. And for her.

My thoughts pass the time for me. The trip to Kasukabe is a success. I get off of the train and find the nearest station employee. I ask them for directions to the river, he tells me that there's a bus that takes me right up to it or I can walk four kilometres to get to it. I thank him and exit the station. The little neighbourhood that surrounds the area is tranquil. A far cry from the busyness of the city. I think I'll walk down there. It's still fairly early although the sun is starting to vanish beyond the horizon. 17:35. It'll probably be gone by the time I find these tunnels.

Along the street are mostly quiet homes. A few places around here seem to be celebrating on their own. Cars driving around are infrequent, many stopping at the various convenience stores along the road. These stores are always open. Always working. The feeling of the air changes, the temperature drops. I must be getting near the river. There's a strange smell hovering on the air now. I can't determine what it is though. Maybe that’s also the river.

As the bridge to the other half of the city enters my view, I look around at the area. It's not very high up so I should be able to leap down without issue. There's a small sign that stands out to me on the bridge. Looks like there's a local Affairs office further ahead and the highway office is behind me. Nothing about any water ways. I’ll use the bridge as a reference point to make my return trip. There’s a walking path jetting out underneath it into the great beyond. The river must be further up ahead, hidden by local shrubbery. I look around, checking for any people. Clear. I leap off of the bridge and land down beneath it.

The smell on the air returns, I know what this is. It's waste water. It smells awful. The wind is blowing from my left, the direction of the sinking sun. If the smell is traveling down here then something must be further west. I walk against the wind, the air crashes into me and envelops my body. It's gross.

The further I travel, the less and less society surrounds the path. I can see why this location was chosen. Not too many eyes would be on someone out here. Maybe once a month local municipal

workers would come out to check on things. I'm sure as it develops more it'll see more traffic but for now, it's a hobbyist's adventure. Ah, that's what we should've taken a look at. Any missing persons reports from this area. I can imagine some marathon runner training out here might've be kidnapped, never to be seen again.

The river grows in size the further down the path I go. I can start to make out a few lone buildings in the distance. The light of day has vanished and there are unfortunately no overhead lights along the route. It’s nearly pitch black. There are fortunately, lights on over at some buildings down the trail. I guess this is where I'm going to start my search.

Outside of the building is a sign on the street but unfortunately it's too dark to see it now. 18:10. Yeah that's all the light I'm getting today. For all my planning, I never thought to bring a flashlight. Oh well, I don't think it'll matter too much when I'm inside the tunnels. I make my way to the building, surprisingly the entrance is unlocked. Not sure how staffed this place is but being night time on New Years Eve, I don't think I’ll run into anybody.

I walk inside the building and wander around the lobby. Doesn’t look like anybody is here. I can make my way further in without interruption. The hollow halls don't exactly inspire me but it's better to get this done without running into anyone. Signs on the wall point towards the direction a ladder can be found. Would’ve preferred an elevator… I walk in the directions of the signs and find the door to the room where the ladder should be. Faintly on the air, sound is being distorted. It's as if something is cutting through the air. Am I hearing things? No, that sound is very real! I drop to the floor, a sword crashes into the door in front of me.

“This is far enough Cassandra Watson.” A voice from behind? I turn around and look down the hall. Junko Nazono is standing at the doorway behind me. The attitude of the room has turned sour. All these confusing feelings I have for her swell up inside me but I don't know what to do about them. I stare at the talking corpse. The tint of death covers the same parts of her face. The lips that

mimic the shade of ice. Her eyes as cold and sharp as the blade she flung at me.

“Is this the famed Japanese sword play?” I ask her, picking myself back up. I pull her weapon out of the door and throw it back at her.

“I did practice kendo in my adolescence.” She smirks, catching her sword out of the air.

“They teach that move in kendo club? Seems like a reach for a normal club like that no?”

“Of course not. That was what I use to kill anyone My Lady misses.”

“You were just a regular ol' upstanding Japanese citizen. Now you're aiding a criminal. No. Not just a criminal. A monster. That makes you a monster too.” My taunt works, provoking her into attacking me. She runs at me, blade in hand but suddenly jams it into the wall. She holds onto the hilt and jumps up, throwing her feet into me. Am I being dropkicked?! She’s dropkicking me! The amount of force she put in blasts me through the damaged door and I fly down into the tunnel below. The colour scheme along the walls flashes from grey concrete to rustic, crimson red.

I crash at the bottom on my back, that's a real pain in the ass. Actually, it doesn’t hurt as much as a fall from that height should. It’s like I landed on something that braced my impact. Damn, what the hell was that? I don't think they teach that in kendo club either. I look up and see her diving down at me. Ok, fight time. I summon my own sword and prepare for the attack. She lands on top of me, miraculously balancing herself on of my sword in the midair. Junko pushes down hard on it, forcing me to use both hands to hold her up. She swipes her blade down at me. It's getting dangerously close to my hand. If she wasn't human, I could just slice her head off in frozen time. Why am I thinking about that at all? I pause time and I lift my right foot up, kicking it into her stomach and pushing her away. She lands somewhere in front of me, giving me time to pick myself up. I have it on good authority that I’ve found my tunnel.

“What...” She pauses and grimaces in pain, putting her off-hand over her stomach. “Why would what I am matter to you? Look at what you did to me just now. How human are you Cassandra? If

you didn't stop me there and I slashed your hand open, would you have bled? If I cut your head off would I see muscle and bone? You fell over 50 meters down and yet you're fine. What irony you fail to realise when delivering critique!" She yells. She lifts herself up, preparing for the next attack.

"That wasn't very honourable of you Junko. Maybe you need to go back to kendo club for some lessons!" She grips her sword again with both hands and charges at me. I'm impressed she has the stamina for this. I figured the anaemia would've dealt with her by now and forced her to stop. I slash my blade into the ground in a crescent shape, cutting myself off from her. The dust and dirt kick up, hiding me in their haze. The footsteps stop.

"You don't need to do this. Just go home. Start fresh." I tell her, trying to create distance between the two of us.

"You don't get it. I owe her my life!"

"Life? Is what you're doing right now living? Since the moment I first saw you, you've had a sickly, pale look. The purple around your lips, the wounded eye, skin devoid of warmth, your body is so thin. Have you seen yourself in a mirror?"

"I don't have just a foot in the grave, I have a whole body inside it. I died 10 years ago. I was left for dead in the middle of nowhere in Saitama. Four psychopaths murdered me. Later when I was found the media blamed me for my own fucking death. My face and name was published in every damn newspaper in every damn city in Japan. All while the sick fucks that did this had their identities hidden from the public."

"The media blamed you, the victim? Society left you to die?"

"I've struggled for the past decade, scrounging, stealing, robbing, fucking what I needed to, to survive. You couldn't even begin to imagine how fucked up the whole situation is. I live because of My Lady's power. I have righted the wrongs that society left me to die with. We will kill anyone and everyone who propagates this miserable system." The murder scene. Police and politicians. So then,

the cult link is a red herring. They're using it to redirect the focus of the investigation. They would've gotten away with it too, without this meddling detective.

"Listen, Junko, what happens next? What happens when you run out of your usefulness? Your Lady goes on to the next person, the next victim and does the same. She fills your head with cunning whispers and fantastical illusions, her specialty is trickery!"

"If I die, I die! My life is hers, I already said it. I've done as she asked and in return she helped me kill everyone who has wronged me."

"And what did your Lady get in return?"

"Enough flesh to stupendously gorge herself upon for days on end."

"You're an idiot. I've heard love blinds people but you don't care. You think this absolves you of responsibility because she'll fix it in the end. You aren't following the rules of society, you make them up to suit you. This is all casuistry." The atmosphere calms down. We agree on the silence between us. Neither of us say another word or make another move. I'd rather not have to hurt her, especially after my grandstanding just now. But I can't just leave her either, not like this. If she gets back to Yidhra before I do then the entire plan is shot. I don't exactly have a place to hide her either. Doubly so because I'm technically a figure of authority here. I can't do anything for her right now. Maybe it's best I just let her go and deal with the fallout.

"Just stay away from Yidhra. I can't spend any more time with you." I stick my hand out and my sword vanishes into nothingness.

"You're just walking away? And you think I'll listen to you? You? What happened to the half dead girl that I first encountered?! You look even younger than I! How does a kid get into this position? Did you just get real lucky and happen to solve some case in high school for Aion?"

"If any authorities catch you out this late you'll be taken in and questioned. They already know your face. That counts for you and Yidhra. Don't try it." I turn around and head further into the

tunnel. What am I doing? I'm letting her go. I'm giving her a chance.

“Hey! You think any of that worked on me? Like I won't go straight to Lady Yidhra and tell her about this?” I hope she takes this as a chance to start over. She probably won't. She’ll probably show up later and I'll have to take care of her there too. A problem for future me I suppose. Ahaha, I'm an idiot. The power of love is saving her life right now.

The tunnels are surprisingly well lit. The walls around me pulse with every step. I hear the flow of liquids run with each contraction. I feel the shadow of hands reach behind me. My body crashes onto the ground, I flip around to face her. I can feel her hands on my thighs, she's going for a knife! Her hand swings upward with the slicer in hand and stabs into my chest. Quickly she raises it again and stabs me in the same spot once more. I lay there, half expecting for the next one to be into my face.

But I can't die here. I punch her in the stomach as best I can in my position. I think I held that back enough. She goes limp on top of me. Fuck. It stings and burns and hurts. I push her body off of mine and to the side. Staring at the ceiling of the underworld, the stars shining down upon me. I take a moment, preparing my body to move. I clench my fists tightly and force myself to turn on my side and stand up against the soft wall of the tunnel. Blood is spilling out. I'll get to that in a second, my head is light. I close my eyes and think about what happened.

Yeah, it was dumb. Why would she listen? To me, her enemy. Why didn't I just pause time? I already paused it… If she actually killed me here…

“So you do bleed.” She faintly says as she rolls over, looking up at me. “There's a folktale that says cherry blossoms only bloom over human bodies. That's where they get their beautiful colours from. I guess a tree could grow above you too…”

Love. That's the power of love and I underestimated it. She struggled no different than I did but I ignored it and subsequently paid for it. She fully believes in herself while I have nothing left to

believe in. She's living a life that still fulfils her. What am I doing this for? Why do I continue to work for these Gods who continue to betray me? Is it because I have no choice but to do so? Even if it's for them, this time at least I'm doing it my way. I bring my left hand up to the stab wounds and take a deep breath. Time reverses my wounds, making me none worse for wear. I take another deep breath and walk away. I look back for a moment, just to get the point jammed into her head.

"Don't get back up. If I see you again, ***I'll kill you.***" My final words to her as I turn away to leave.

Delisionalism

Beyond the hidden veil once again, I walk into carmine stained air, still with the scent of death. Whispers crawl into the back of my head. Voices from the far reaches of space itself. This is what drives away inquiring minds. This place is beyond rancid, beyond repulsive. The construction here oddly looks more like debris from an accident, as if this area had been destroyed rather than built. It's all covered in mould, crumbled concrete, rotten planks of wood from scaffolding that was hardly hanging onto the walls of the man made cavern. I can see bones scattered about, no different from the scattered rubbish already covering the area. Crushed, splintered, chewed on, recognisably human. Some look more developed than others. Although I'm no coroner, I can tell the difference between a child's skeleton and an adult. How was it possible though? How long has this been going on for? How long has this area, which should be all means should be sealed off from the public, been hosting these bodies? Long enough to apparently shred off all of their meat. Bodies of the dead sitting upon one another. Now I can only think of what the creature that lurks in the corners of my eyes to commit such murder is like.

I stare down the war-like path, looking for any movement. Any sort of hint that will point me in the direction of my prey. With every step I make, the path pushes back at me. Waiting for the second I lose focus, the moment I get lost, the inkling of me doubting myself. My footsteps make noise similar to stepping into wet patches of mud. Every step I take, the ground squelches at me, as if it didn't want to be stepped on. The further I delve, the heavier the atmosphere around me becomes.

The cavern sort of reminds me of the graveyard in Leng. Death surrounds me. These caverns breathe a filthy, blood-laden air. The ground responds to steps on top of it. The walls watch me with a curious gaze. They have seemingly be given the gift of life. Or rather, the curse of flesh.

“HEY! YIDHRA! WE DOING THIS OR WHAT?!” I'm tired of these long, dark passages full of sick bullshit. I've already won our fight, she's the one who should be afraid.

“The wind will not blow me down! The snow will not slow me down! The sun will not scorn me! The rain will not defeat me! If you continue any further, I will turn you into one of those trees! My blade **霊魂消滅(Annihilationism)** is the final judge of this world. It can cut through destiny itself! I will slay you, wicked woman, and any other impenitent who tries to stop us!” The voice from earlier? The girl has dedication to her boss that’s for certain. I turn around to face her. She's pulling her blade out of the Saya, the scabbard. An ethereal glow radiates off of the weapon. A deathly violent shade of purple drips down and off of the Ito, the hilt. The droplets on the ground start smoking, as if they’re burning the flesh-like floor. What ever that is, I can't let it touch me.

“I forsake the world that sends *you*, asking of me to fall in line! *Judgement Sign: Only the Righteous Survive!*” She throws out slashes from her blade as fast as her words. She's really going all out. If I were any other opponent she’d have the upper hand on me. By that, I mean I easily dodge everything she's throwing at me. She's lost the form she was fighting with earlier and replaced it with messy swinging. She's going to do whatever it takes to hit me.

“So noisy. You sure have a lot to say for being a dead person. What happened to the silent dead?” I reply. Alright, no more messing around, I gave her enough warning. I'll finish her right now. I raise my left arm and pull my sword out of time. I'm not even going to snap my fingers, I'm going to freeze time and kill her in it.

“ONE! TWO!” She shouts with each slash. One left, one right. Time isn't stopping for her?! Fine. I didn't want to win like that anyways.

“ONE! TWO!” She continues. It has to be that katana. Whatever power it has, it's saving her. If time doesn't stop her then time will support me. This is like my fight against Thanatos. I can do this.

“ONE! TWO!” Her arms swing back and forth, her motions are desperate but that doesn't make

them any less dangerous. How about if I strike quicker than she's swinging? How will she react?

I speed up my own movement, holding my blade down and outward from my waist, slashing right through her. I can feel the sword cut in and out of her middle section. She didn't have time to react to it or block it. I see blood dripping down from the tip of my weapon.

“You can't kill the dead! *Heavenly Art: Rest of the Seventh Day!*” The sound of running emerges from behind me. I'm glad. Happy. I can get a little wild then. The air around us shifts, the pressure pushes down harder on us. The red glow deepens. It tells me her next move.

“***That's it?! Ten years of hate?! That's all it could muster?!***” I shout at her, grabbing her sword mid stab. It hovers over my midsection, giving me free movement around her.

“What is this faerie concoction on your blade? What trickery do you bring into our battle?” The icy cold steel rips my hand open. I can feel the flesh inside burn as the deathly substance drips into the wound.

I bring my sword arm over and swing it across her face. Blood splatters out of her like a red can of paint being thrown at a wall. The portion of her face I slashed off is pulled back down on itself. Her face is fully healed, as if I never struck her. Incredible. She can't be harmed. No, she can’t be killed. Her spell protects her. Well, then I'm going to hurt her until this parlour trick stops working.

I stab my sword into her again, and again, and again. Ten slashes rip into her for every one second she can recognise. She reacts by pushing her sword forward. I grip it harder with my right hand. I stand firm but this could be a mistake. My body is further forward than her. She opts to dig her blade into me. It carves into me, reaching my stomach. What excruciating pain. This feeling reminds me of the burning sensation inside my mind when I looked at her master.

Whatever it is though doesn't matter right now. Her brain has been reduced to shredded cheese yet her body can still move. I wonder if it's even her. Am I fighting Junko or am I fighting Yidhra?

“Let's turn this up a notch, shall we? I wanted to get back before the turn of the millennia.

Forbidden Art: Full House!" My form splits up. Four additional Cassandra's all with ample opportunity to fight her.

"*Annihilation Sign: Eternal Complete Punishment!"* She pulls her sword back and raises it into the air. The room around us is being swallowed up by pure darkness. She must be charging energy for her final attack. Well this isn't an anime or a manga! I throw my hand outward to skip the time she's spending on preparing her attack. Her face betrays her confident movement, she looks confused, unsure, she doesn't understand how the flow of time has shifted. My copies all catch her unaware of the situation she's in and attack. One goes for the head, another stabs through her chest, the third stabs through her back and the fourth one slices at her feet.

She protects her head well enough, repelling the attack with her sword but is unable to prevent any damage to the other parts of her body. She falls to the ground, a clean slice rips through both legs as another blade rips her chest open. This is no longer a fight, it's a slaughter. She's going to regret not listening to me.

I snap my fingers and turn back time. A sneak peak at what I've planned for your glorious master. The scene replays, the same attack, the same ending. And she's completely unaware of it. I snap my fingers again. The onslaught crashes into her. Again. And again. Faster. Stronger. The loop continues once more. All of her movements become visibly slower. She's finally out of gas. Parts of her body collapse to the ground. Her head the last to fall. She slowly looks up with bitter tears in her eyes. I smile down at her. The darkness around us fades away, the red haze that previously filled the area returns.

"Your dreams and hopes are incompatible with reality." I stare down at her. She slowly picks herself up, her body putting itself back together, albeit much more slowly. Stabbing her sword into the flesh like ground to use as a balance, she stares at me with an exhausted face. The mysterious glow around the blade fades. Not bad, not bad at all. That was *fun*.

“Bloom nobly, fallen soul.”

“My… lady… ” Junko voices fades into silence. I snap my fingers, ending the spell. My copies vanish into dust.

“Isn't there a saying in this country that goes something like, the dead have no mouths?” I walk over to her and lift her body up. She smells like Spring. Were you a cherry blossom tree before Yidhra found you? I set her up against one of the underground pillars. Looking around at my surroundings, I can't identify the direction I came from. Our fight took us even deeper into the tunnels. I return to her sword and slide it into it's sheathe. I stand it up next to her. Your job is done, this is the extent of your honour.

“Showing up unannounced without an invitation, is there a term for such rudeness where you come from?” An unknown voice? No, the voice I heard in my dreams.

“You're the culprit, Yidhra right? Why did you murder those politicians and police? I can't imagine it was just out of altruism for Junko.”

“You can't answer a question with a question. Plus, it was the cult. Not me. I simply gave them something to turn their hate towards. It's good for humans to keep busy after all.”

“Keep them busy? You trick them! You lie and deceive them, then you have them killed! You’re definitely the culprit.”

“Well, I don't have them killed. I kill them. It's wonderful. You walked through them after all. My world is built with their bodies. How did you like it? My Mou Ho Jau Zi Hoeng, my Utopia!” She explodes with laughter after her words. The bloody walls of flesh around us contract and relax with her.

“Dead and decrepit. This is the most natural look for humans after all. Since, you know, the majority of your time will be spent in a box underneath the Earth. Now, I will fill you with horrors beyond comprehension. It seems you didn't learn the first time around so let me enrich you with

despair!" She says.

"I already know it was you and Junko. It doesn't matter what you do, how long you do it or when you do it. It will lead to the same future. So why don't you just give up now?"

"Give up? But you're the one who has come despite not being invited. Why don't I let you leave with your life and you have another story to add to your one hundred supernatural tales?"

"I already know it was you and Junko. It doesn't matter what you do, how long you do it or when you do it. It will lead to the same future. So why don't you just give up now?"

"Give up? Just because you beat Junko doesn't mean you can beat me!" She flips the palms of her hands upwards, shutting each finger over it. Her nails travel down her arm. Long and inhuman, perhaps more akin to the claws of beasts.

"Yes, I see now. You're afraid aren't you? I know your secrets. I can stop you just like… I did… before… " She trails off, her face shifting to reflect the thoughts running around in her head. She stares down at her hands, trepidation forms over her face.

"Like before? Before what?" I question her, further adding to the confusion on her face. Her eyes shift from left to right. Her body tenses up, the walls freeze.

"When did you do this?! It's... empty… you're... empty… "She lets her focus go for just a second and now I can take control of the situation. I snap my fingers, recalling Kassandra. Standing by my side, I stare forward at my silent foe.

"How positively delightful. Looks like your trick worked." Her comment causes Yidhra's face to fall aghast. She must be connecting the dots in her head.

"But how?! When did this happen?! Who are you?!" Her shouting is directed at my partner in crime.

"Me? I'm Kassandra Watson." Ripe with taunt, she speaks only to further anger and upset our opponent.

“You cheated! The greatest cheater! Not only the power of time but a double! This is what you mean? You have every choice in the universe, every advantage!” Her words are interesting. I'll play this game a little longer.

“Why would I look at every choice to make in the universe? That's way too much work.”

“How did you know?!”

“Know what exactly?” I respond.

“Don’t play stupid with me! You were dreaming. Did she save you?” Yidhra points at Kass in a rage filled motion. Kass shrugs.

“I saved myself. Nothing special about that.”

“Then… getting here… you knew how to find me. You had every edge against Junko. Against me. You completely outclassed us. You made every right choice against fate then pull our strings!”

“Hmm, the right choice against fate? There is no fate that I can't see. The only choice I make is the right choice.” I shout. Yidhra hangs her head dejectedly. The atmosphere around us shrinks away. “Knowing the ending however, didn't make it any less enjoyable.”

“Tell me one thing before you get rid of us.” Yidhra speaks up.

“I can spare a little more knowledge. What would you like to know?” I ask. I crouch down to level with her.

“How did it feel? Killing someone like that over and over again?” She must be referring to Junko. Interesting. I guess I should answer honestly.

“I feel some initial resistance, then a smooth slice right though. Kinda like bread.” I reply. No response is returned to me.

“Sheesh, she's really out of it huh? How many times did she go through the loop?” A voice calls from the shadows. Althea bubbles up and out of the ground. Everyone has shown up right on time.

“It was one loop every second. How many seconds are in two whole days Althea?”

“172,800 seconds. You made her go through 172,800 time loops?” I nod at Althea.

“Where'd you learn that trick?” She asks.

“I didn't really learn it but it's what Kass here did to me for a thousand years so I figured why not put a little spin on it.”

“The spin being time? Did you do as many loops as you made Yidhra do?”

“Oh no, Nyarlathotep was very slow and methodical. They did everything to perfectly copy me and my actions.”

“Yes, to faithfully recreate your personality. Unfortunately I failed in my test run against you Althea.”

“The power of Truth, right?” I ask her and she nods to answer me.

“So how are we going to go about this?” Althea walks over to Yidhra and pokes the fainted monster with her finger.

“I'd like to take them both away. Discretely. Can you do that Althea?”

“Oh please, Cass. You insult my ability with such a question. May I remind you who had saved a young Cassandra and Daphne from-”

“I'm sorry Althea. Then I'll leave it to you.” Casually interrupting her, I push the conversation forward.

“Kass, let's bring Junko over. Then we'll all go back at the same time.”

“Lead the way detective.” She extends her arms outward, asking me to step forward first. I step out into the now fading red mist that previously sat in the air. It has mostly faded away and with it, the soiled flesh that covered the cthonic innards of the world I was kicked into. Junko is where I left her this time. She's still against one of the giant pillars holding up the sky. The second battle seems to have done it's job. There is one more thing I need to do.

“Let's take her back. C'mon grab her feet.”

“What about that sword of hers?”

“That thing definitely needs to be locked up somewhere. I’ll carry it for now.” I take hold of the blade that made the ground quiver with it's magic. Going to need to think of what to do with this. Maybe just have it gather dust in my office.

We lift Junko up and carry her over to Althea. Her magic circles are already on the ground around her, she's ready get them out of here. Althea is dragging Yidhra into one of the circles. We take Junko over to the circle next to her and set her inside it. There is something has been on my mind since fighting Junko. I think there's a little more work to do but for now, I want these two out of here.

“Look at these little horrors beyond comprehension.”

“Beyond comprehension? Aha, goodness Cass. I'd say if anything, you're the most fearsome thing down here.”

“Think so?”

“I do feel like I've made some considerable progress in replacing you, should you ever need to be put down for your crimes.”

“Glad to know I have my own backup waiting to take over for me.” I reply to her. The sound of footsteps climbing down stairs enters the area around us. Where is it coming from? Who could be showing up all the way out here?

One of the pillars in front of us opens its mouth. Cassidy steps out of it and waves his hand at me. He takes a look around the area and gives a thumbs up. I smile at him.

“Cass, you still in there? Everything worked out! You did it, you beat her!” A man behind Cassidy comes into view. Chrono. He holds his arm out and across Cassidy as if he didn't want the other man to come any closer.

“Fantastic work Cass, I can see why Aion relies on you so much.” That annoying voice.

“Chrono, you're here in person. I'm almost in disbelief to see you here on Earth.”

“Well I'm sure you know why.” He tilts his head and dismissively waves his hand at Cassidy. The man who works under Chrono shrinks away.

“I had a feeling.” I reply to him.

“Cassandra your service is highly appreciated, thank you. Good job. I'll take over from here.”

“That's not your choice to make.”

“Yeah, well, it kinda is so I'm gonna need you to just make this easier for the both of us.”

“No, it's not. Now I'm going to ask you to leave Chrono. The Dream Witch and Junko Nazono are my responsibility.”

“Look, Cass you… ” I raise my hand at him, cutting him off.

“You're speaking to Kairos, I who have lived a thousand of your lives. This is my job. I'll handle it. If you have a problem, I'm sure we can sort it out.”

“Tch… same line huh? Fine. But don’t let it get to your head. You may live a thousand of my lives Kairos, but I only need *one* of yours. Cassidy, help these ladies out.” He snaps his fingers, vanishing. Did he just threaten me back with my threat?

“Are we all going together then?” Althea speaks up.

“We'll talk about it. Cassidy is much more reasonable than Chrono. I'm sure we can reach an agreement. Whether or not it benefits all parties…” As prompted, Cassidy re-enters the field with Chrono's exit.

“We have much to discuss it seems.” He speaks up, walking towards us.

“This isn't going to be justice Cassidy. It's selfishness.” I tell him.

“Tell me, what are you thinking Cass?”

“I'd like to remove Junko and Yidhra from this situation. I will go back in time and ensure the events that took place on the night of the 27th, the early morning of the 28th do not take place. Time

will flow as if the party went off without a hitch. Nobody dies, nobody goes making a fuss in the media nor government.”

“What exactly do you mean remove from the situation Cass? Remove as in, they will no longer exist?”

“Correct. If possible, I'd like Junko's records adjusted after the reversal of events. Adjusted as in, make her disappear, give her a new life.”

“A new life?” He responds in question.

“I'd like to give her a new chance. Third time is the charm after all.”

“Junko didn't operate anywhere but the underground it seems so the last thing on her record is her death. If she is arrested and tried for her crimes, that would be like stepping into an even muddier swamp.”

“I get that. I want to go a step further. I’m asking you to basically forge the papers for me. For her.”

“I am hesitant to do so, Cass. It is not that I doubt you. I doubt her.” He points at her unconscious body.

“Give us some time. I'll have her as right as rain by April.”

“If, by then, she can properly show integration into society and not have any of her past actions return to bite her in the bottom, I will secure what she needs.”

“I guarantee it Cassidy. A shot to live her life. That’s all I ask.” The middle aged man furrows his brow, I can see his hesitance to agree written all over his face.

“I suppose the rest of the team is not needed here. Everything is done and taken care of?” He asks.

“Yes, we will make sure the area is safe from any lingering magic.” I try to reassure him.

“Not like anything here will take place after you fix things I suppose. Chrono didn't like your

actions but we'll be in contact if anything comes up.”

“It'll be fine. Unfortunately, your job is going to get a lot more boring after these two vanish.” I say with a smile on my face, hoping to keep the situation end of friendly terms.

“I'd much rather have a boring job than to have to worry about death waiting for me. I'll see your request done Cassandra.” He smiles back at me. He waves his hand at us and turns back into the silo. The steps of his dress shoes echo in the hollow stairway.

Mother of Dishonesty

“I want that mechanical prison of mine going to Junko. I’m going to have her stick around, try and make use of her.” I tell Althea as soon as the sound of footsteps fade.

“Sure, I can do that. What do you have in mind?” She quickly responds.

“Recreate her face, put a glamour on the body, whatever you need to do.”

“Gonna make her your hitman or something?” She asks.

“Nothing like that. Well…” I hesitate a response. She could do work like that. She'd be perfect for it too. “Let's keep an open mind, shall we? She's talented. Extremely talented. It would all go to waste without guidance.”

“And you don't want it going to waste?”

“She was working hand in hand with Yidhra for a decade. She will need time before reintegrating into society. I want to help her.”

“I see. I'll help her out too. She's a victim too after all.”

“She wasted her second chance but I’m giving her another one.” I say to Junko's resting face.

“What if she doesn't listen? If she continues to seek out Yidhra's instruction?”

“I've felt her fierce loyalty to her Lady first hand. As victor over both of them, I hope it helps persuade her to understand that I am now the target of that loyalty.”

“Do you really think that Cass?”

“No. If she doesn't wish to be a part of things then she is free to leave. I still want her receiving the body.”

“What if she doesn't behave after leaving?”

“She'll behave. I know she will.” I didn't have a basis for saying that. I don't control her. She has

her own free will. But I don't think she's that kind of person.

“Alright, take them back. Yidhra has to go. Junko will stay. Kass, you have to come back. Althea, take the body with you. Give it to Junko.”

“Pity, I had a great time with this joy ride. I do suppose a nice rest is in order however.”

“When's the last time you got some rest?”

“It's been a couple days. I stayed up the entire time, learning about this Yidhra. You should be rather grateful.” Her final words while possessing the doll. It drops to the ground and Althea drags it into it's designated circle.

“I am. Thank you. We made swift work of her thanks to you.”

Please ravish me with praise when I awake. And if Junko doesn’t ever wake back up…

The voice comes from inside my head. I can feel a sort of haze cover my mind. It’s not a bad sensation. Maybe it’s some sort of defensive cover. It feels reassuring to have all of me back in one place.

“Are we good to go then?” Althea speaks up. I nod at her.

“Get them out of here.” I flick my thumb backwards and Althea makes the bodies of Junko and Yidhra dissolve into darkness. Shortly thereafter, my duplicate body vanishes.

“See you in Atlantis?” She asks me.

“Yeah, of course. I just have one small thing to take care of before returning.” I say to her with a wave of my hand. She waves back, the form of her body shifts into a black mass, slowing melting away into the ground. The circles lose their magical glow and disappear as well. One more thing. One more encounter. My final encounter of this journey once more.

I snap my fingers in similar fashion, letting time openly freeze. This will bring her here, I know it will. I wait out the time require to unfreeze. 62 seconds now. Did I really only do it one more time? Ah, right Junko could still move despite time being stopped. I’m surprised she didn’t show up

during our battle. It's an agonisingly long time to wait. Just over a minute but waiting for her feels like an eternity.

As soon as the 62nd second passes I can hear footsteps behind me. She's here. My heart drops into my stomach. I feel horrified of turning around and seeing her standing there. She'll have the same beautiful, porcelain skin. Her flawless smile. Her perfect face with her deep blue eyes will be staring at me. I'm afraid of talking to the woman I love but I have to try.

“I found you.” Her voice calls out. I'm just going to get straight to business. I have to. I take a deep breath and turn around to face her. Her perfect form, imposing as it ever was and will ever be.

“Aion.” I call out. Her name clings to my lips like I’m starting a prayer. Alright Kairos, just like you did with Chrono. Assert yourself.

“Did you try ending the universe for me or for Kairos?” I ask.

“I don't want to argue with you Cassandra.”

“Then don't turn it into an argument. Please, Aion, answer the question.”

“It was for Kairos. You are Kairos and you aren't Kairos as I'm sure you've come to understand.”

“Thank you Aion.”

“May I?” Aion asks.

“Go ahead.” I reply.

“What happened to them? How did it all end?” She points at the spots Yhidra and Junko were laying at moments ago.

“I took care of it. Not for you. Not for Chrono. For myself.”

“Then, Junko and Yidhra both lost?”

“They lost the moment they decided to team up and commit murder.”

“Even if it was their only choice?”

“There's always another choice Aion. For us who can see through time, it's easier, but there's

always another way.”

“I thought, if they could get away with it, they'd get what they wanted.”

“You knew about them. Why did you let it happen?”

“I thought it would give me something fun to do. You know I am easily bored.”

“I am tired of all the lying and deceit Aion. Be honest with me. There's nothing to hide now. They're finished.”

“Tell me Cass, does water feel guilty for eroding the ground? For floods and hurricanes? For falling from the sky? For providing life? Doing what it is made to do? It acts as the Gods made it and I expect it to perform as such.” Aion says.

“Are you comparing everything those two did to water?”

“What a childish outlook, Cassandra.”

“No Aion, it's not childish. It's real. You're right, water does not feel guilty. The difference in our thought process is that I believe water accepts the world it's in despite changing it. Water acts as it is expected to act. Acceptance and change can mutually occur. You do not believe both can coexist. That's why you tried to end my universe. You didn't believe in me like I believe in water. After all, even a single drop can shatter the mighty surface of the ocean.”

Aion doesn't respond. She stays quiet and looks away from me. Another moment of silence between us.

“I always knew that I was the one the universe was rejecting. That's why a counter measure kicked in. Funny, you weren't even the one I needed to fight but we fought anyways. Did you fight me because of the lies? Or because of the truth?” Aion asks.

“I fought you because you needed to accept me. To accept the changing world. Even now when I think back on it, how the despair of the situation razed my mind. I went to the end of time despite Althea's warning. I went despite knowing that I had no chance against you. I went because I wanted

to see you again."

"Cass..."

"And that's why you're here right now isn't it? You learned from that fight we had all those years ago. You helped reverse the damage you caused. You grew."

"Junko was the first friend I made after you went missing. I knew all about her. I know someday Chrono would've come after her and when you showed up at the Suitomo building instead of him, I knew I would be caught."

"Aion, you're a horrible partner. It's not as if the lab is very big. You could've taken five seconds out of your day to think about someone other than yourself to find me. You could've asked Chrono, you could've checked the computer, you could've asked anybody but you didn't."

"I was selfish in my actions I admit that. I wanted to look but I was lost. I was hopeless. I found something new to distract me."

"And I kept following you like a puppy. Always waiting for a treat to come from your hands. Well, I'm not going to do that anymore, Aion. I'm not the girl who's hand you missed at the end of time anymore."

Aion sighs heavily and covers her face with both hands. I'm tired. I know I'm the one that went out of my way to bring her here but I've overestimated myself. All the time travel and fighting has emptied my tank.

"To search for purpose and create meaning, that's life huh?" She says while pulling her hands away.

"That is life, Aion."

"Well, I tried out this so called life. I lived the past few years as any other human would."

"What did you think of that experience?"

"That it is too ridiculous to even want to be a thing. In fact, it's all worthless, absurd even... But

I'm going to make something of it. Something… with you Cass. Chrono lied to me too. It was surprising to find out that you were hidden right under me the whole time."

"But you both were in on it together. What was all that AI stuff for, really? Is what AO said back then the truth? If so, why is it all still there since I've moved on from it."

"It's a contingency Cass. Everything about Kairos is backed up and saved for future ones. Chrono liked your work enough to base it all on you so we could have a consistent paradigm for any future Kairos that shows up."

"Just to make it easier for you both? You take away this person's freewill because it's easier to manage?"

"I didn't want it to end up that way. I know it was wrong. It's why I tried to end it all. It was for you. It was the only thing I could do to free you."

"In a weird and honestly, fucked up way, that's sort of romantic." I reply.

"I was tired of carrying out a job for Gods that have long left. Of humouring Chrono's work until the end of time. Of setting a different version of you up to watch it die over and over again."

"Aion…"

"Wait, let me finish." She raises her hand, instructing me to stop. "I never stopped AO from revealing the truth to you because I knew you needed to know, but I couldn't be the one to tell you. I was afraid. I agreed to everything it's true. I did let Chrono get away with everything."

"Why?"

"Because I love you Cass. I don't know what it is about this version of you that stands out to me so much but I didn't want to lose it. I did however, know it was going to disrupt the natural balance. If you stayed as a constant like Chrono and I, you would regress. The perspective of Kairos is important to keep limited to the age they're born in. Your point of view provides you with things we are unable to see. You're sensitive to the world around you while we are insensitive."

“But why keep Kairos a secret from me?”

“If you're aware you're above humans you will inevitably behave as if you are above them as well. Gods do not walk among man's roads, they watch over them. As you were unaware of the fact, you are more sympathetic to their cause. More understanding and dependable than either of us could be. So when an issue arises, I bring you along. Chrono has his team.”

“But it's only a contingency. How are there unknowns that exist when you and Chrono can discover any hidden part in time.”

“Because there are some things, *Kass*, that exist outside of time.”

“You know, I was so afraid of you finding out but you really knew the whole time, didn’t you?”

“I don't know the specifics but I was able to fathom what was going on during your fight with AO.” Of course she knew. How was it not obvious I was different by that point? Well it seems like she doesn't see me differently despite that. That's good.

“Aion?” I call her name out.

“Yeah?” She replies.

“Why don't you ever just talk to me?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you never talk to me. You never take the time to just, talk to me. To explain things to me. To communicate with me.” My head is getting light. My body is at its limit. Everything that happened today has completely drained me.

“I… well… I thought I did.”

“Aion, you never tell me what you’re thinking. What you feel. What you see. What you hear. It's always telling me what to do and if I'm lucky, how to do it.”

“I mean I do talk to you. I say things and you respond man.”

“Not like that Aion. Speak to me like your partner, your love. Why don't you ever just, talk with

me.”

“We do talk Cass.”

“I felt at one point I knew who you were Aion, that you shared yourself with me.”

“I don't know. Things… just got busy and messy. I don't know.”

“I was willing to put up with the treatment because I love you but every since I woke up in that lab, it's almost like I'm speaking to a stranger.”

“But we were together after that. I showed up when I found out you were alive. We still spend time together.”

“Aion, do you really think that going out and fighting monsters is what I wanted to do with you? That day I confronted you at the end of time was the end of the story. Even if it didn't end how we thought it would. When I woke up and found myself endlessly walking on the path to Tintagel, I spent so much time thinking about you. Wondering about you. If you would show up and whisk me away to safety. To reassure me and make me feel safe. For a thousand years, my head was always full of thoughts about you. I was agonising over how we would meet again, if I ever got the chance at that.”

“But we were together…”

“Please, Aion, listen. I've known you for so long. I've always wanted to be around you and spend time with you. Now sure, work is time spent together but that's not everything I wanted. You mean everything to me Aion. So much so I was willing to die if it meant getting to see you one last time.”

“Cass…”

“But you wouldn't do the same for me. I'm a carefully curated and managed Kairos. If I died I would take all the pain I experienced along with me. But you, you would have another one set up and ready to go. Isn't that horrible?”

“It's not like I was going to go through with it! I was going to end this timeline like I did the rest.

It wasn't going to be like that. Cass, why don't you try listening to me? There is no need to argue over this."

"Aion, I'm telling you how I feel. I'm talking. Why are you taking it as an attack? Why do you think we're arguing?"

"I dislike that it's framing me as the one at fault."

"Fault? Aion if you feel like you're at fault maybe it's because you are the one who acted as such."

"I was doing what I thought was best. I made decisions based on what I know of the world and what was left waiting for you. I wanted to save you from it."

"And again, you know, in a fucked up sort of cosmic way, thanks. But I still choose to live because it's the only life I have. You and Chrono never have to deal with the consequences of your actions. A hundred years is nothing to you, so what if a few lives are ruined in the process."

"Cass this is unreasonable. I have told you my position as one that must live a long life. Why do you return to the topic? If this is what your talking leads to then perhaps it would be best to not talk." Aion is being so infuriating right now. Why won't she simply listen to what I'm trying to say? What have I done wrong?

"I did choose to fight against all the adversity I've faced so far. I chose the harder path instead of giving up because there's this part inside me that I can't control. This part of me that wants to be around you and see you smile and hear you laugh. That wants to be comforted by you and held passionately. That desires you, above all else. This part of me I have no control over…"

"I understand that Cass. I feel the same. I want the same. Why can we not agree on what ails you and live that life?"

"Because I don't know if I can trust your word. I don't know if what you're doing is for the best for us or if it's the best for you. I dearly want to but your actions up to this point have all indicated

otherwise.”

“Cass it is how it has always been. I am yours. You are mine.”

“Is that how it's always been?” I ask.

“Perhaps it is a bigger deal to you since you have walked alongside humans for so long.” She replies.

“There you go again, pushing my issues aside. I'm telling you how I feel Aion, why do you not listen?”

“It is not as though you are the only one who suffers Cassandra. I too am plagued by feelings I can't control. I have to do my job regardless. I too suffer. I-”

“Aion why can't you just apologise to me man? Why can't you just say you made a mistake? Why do you do everything but try to make me feel better?” I cut her off mid-sentence but I need to be insistent. I need her to learn from this. Even if it doesn't benefit me. One day… she'll learn and grow from this. I can feel my brain shutting down. I'm getting tired. I want to stay up, to keep talking to her though.

“I won't apologise for doing what I believed in Cassandra. If you have lingering feelings over what has occurred then perhaps you should sort them out.”

“What the fuck are you saying Aion? Are you so proud you can't say a single word. A single word that would make me feel better?!”

“So I say this word your issues will magically vanish? You suddenly get better and we go home happy?”

“Aion, you say it to at least acknowledge that something you've done is wrong. Accept the responsibility of your actions. You’re such a hard person to love Aion.” I feel like I'm begging her to apologise. Why is she so dense? Why doesn't Aion just say it. Why doesn't she at least lie and say it? Why is she like this?

It seems we've reached an impasse. Aion is now silent, no longer offering any conversation. I don't think I have anything left to add. Well, I guess I can say I at least tried. I tried… I feel like the world is falling underneath me. Aion has vanished from view. The sky is dark and empty now. I can feel my head laying of something soft. This isn't the cruel, monstrous ground from before, it's warm and comforting.

“Got ya this time. I’m sorry. It took awhile but, I’m here now.” Aion says softly. I stare up at her face, tears stretch down her face. Drops from the ocean spill on my face.

“Aion?” I quietly say. My throat is choking up.

“I don't regret it, not for a moment. Falling in love with you was the best thing to happen to me Cass. I’m sorry.” She sighs after speaking and smiles down at me.

“Then… you…” She lowers her face into mine. What little breath I have left, she takes away with a kiss. How unfair, the one time I am unable to kiss back.

“I have walked my path alone for far too long. Even if it's for a brief moment in my life, it will be for all of your life. Let me walk your path, beside you Cass.”

“Aion…”

“Cass, I love you.” Her words drip out of her mouth like the tears from her face. Each drop splashing into my being and enveloping me in the feeling I have been chasing for so long. Acceptance. Aion is finally here. I blink, slowly, so slowly. My eyes are heavy. She slowly evaporates from my sight. I know she's still here. She can feel me. I can feel her.

The End

Faintly lit by a dull light hanging overhead, I stare up towards my . I sit up on my butt and raise my right leg up so I can put my arm on it. The job is done. For the first time in who knows how long, I'm waking up without the soul crushing weight of the world on me. She must've brought me back. I can feel tears roll down my face. The fact that I've woken back up here in my office is proof of the ending. It's over. This is where the journey ends. The Mysterious Junko and the Dream Witch Yidhra are no more. Tokyo will return to it’s regularly scheduled assortment of criminals and it’s citizens will be none the wiser.

It's refreshing. Relief pours over my body, mind, and soul. After everything, all the waiting, all the struggling, all the happiness and sadness, I made it here. All this sentimentality and I've only just woken up. She was there for me at the end. No, not the end, the beginning. This is where we can finally be ourselves, together. I wipe the tears from my face off with the sleeve of my sleepwear. I still have responsibilities of my own to take care of though. There are still things I have to do. I hop out of bed, leaving the last of my sniffles behind. I walk towards my bathroom but there's something that catches my eye. My desk looks so cluttered. Did I leave it that way or did someone come by to snoop around?

I walk over to it and stare at the mess on top. Numerous parcels are scattered over my desk. There’s a lone, wrapped box besides them. I grab the top letter and stare at it. It's from Morrigan. I pick up another one. It's from Eris. The next, Ceres. The last one is from Cordelia. I return to Morrigan's, flipping it over and opening up to what's inside. It's a letter addressed to me. Of course it is, this is my desk!

“Dear Cassandra Watson,

Although we've only spent a short amount of time together, I feel as if I've known you for a long time. That's not just to say because you are Kairos. I have known many Kairos. Although I suppose in my case, I knew ones from a different universe.

Cassandra, I didn't properly do this but I will now. Thank you for bring everyone back together. Thank you for helping reverse the actions of *you know who*. I'm glad to know that they exist on in their own way. I'm sure my big sister would extend her thanks to you as well. Thank you for often joining me for sessions of afternoon and high tea. I dearly wish to have you join future sessions as well. I think we're quite overdue!

Things here got exciting for a moment. I didn't know exactly what was going on but I did relish in helping trick Chrono for you. It was the least I could do. I do express some regret at letting what happened to you happen but, I was so determined to see things fixed and you were the only one I could rely on. Funny, isn't it? Although *we* had never previously met, you were already an idol in my eyes. Someone who could change things. And you did. I'm deeply appreciative of it.

I'm having the other girls write their own letters of appreciation as well. They were in danger of being forgotten whether they admit it or not! You did help save them! Don't let them tell you otherwise!

Take care of yourself. Stop by when you're ready. I'll wait for you.

With Love,

Morrigan"

They're all letters huh. I'll read through them in a bit. I'd like to wash of the sweat and grime from yesterday's encounter. I take a deep breath and walk into the bathroom.

I get the shower started and drop my clothes. I step inside the blasting torrent of water, the heat feels so good. I go about my morning routine, all the usual things. I brush my teeth, comb my hair, put some moisturiser on and throw my usual outfit on. Maybe it's time for a style update… This will

have to do for now though.

Ss soon as I sit my butt down, a knock comes from the door. Of course but, it's just how things work for me right? Annoying, but I get back up and open the door. The girl on the other side immediately allows herself in.

“Hey Watson, check this out.” Daphne waves a photo of a decently sized boat at me. I don't get it...

“It's a boat. Cool. I guess. So what?” I respond.

“Look at what is on the boat you bozo!” On the boat? I grab the thing out of her hands to take an actual look at the photo this time. There's something written on the side of it. It says *Ereignishorizont*. That must be the name of the vessel. Oh, I see. This is interesting. I get what she's going on about now.

“Who does this boat belong to? How'd you get a pic of this?” I ask her.

“No idea. I just came across it swimming around Aulis.”

“Aulis… Huh? Seriously?” I’m surprised. Didn’t think I’d hear that name again. What was she doing there?

“I asked Althea about it and she said she's heard of a ship that sails around the seas, only showing up only on new moons. She said that it matches the one in my photo.”

“Only on new moons? And Althea knows about it? This sounds suspicious Daph.”

“She said it looked familiar is all. Don't sweat it dude.”

“And you don't recognise it?”

“Oh my gosh Cass you think I know every boat on the sea?” Her question prompts me to laugh. No, I suppose she wouldn't know something like that.

“I was worried you wouldn't wake back up in time for this.” She uncharacteristically looks away while speaking.

“Oh, guess I just kinda got lucky huh?”

“You were out for five days dude! When Aion showed up with you Althea was fuming mad! I don't think I've ever heard her yell that loud.” She replies. I was out for five days? That's not too bad compared to most deep sleeps I enter. Plus, I feel pretty good. Lighter.

“Now, I know it's sudden but methinks you and I are overdue for an adventure. It just so happens that the first new moon of the year is tomorrow.” She says.

“It has been a few years…” I reply to her.

“Waddaya say then?” She asks me. Hmm, avoiding responsibility is sure to piss everyone off and delay Junko's assistance. On the other hand, a ship that nobody has ever seen is surfacing somewhere on the planet tomorrow. Alright, I'm making a judgment call here.

“Oh you know me. Our Adventure Will Never End, Daph. I think you better get lots of bags with lots of space because we're gonna clean that ship of every treasure it's got!” I tell her.

“Hell yeah, Watson. Now you're talking!” She replies excitedly.

“Let me finish getting ready. We'll leave as soon as possible.” I go back to my desk and gather the letters that were left for me.

“This thing will be a cinch to find don't even worry!” Daphne walks over to my desk, peaking at everything scattered about. She reaches for the wrapped box and lifts it up. Oh right, I was going to go through these.

“May I?” I say, extending my arm out to her, hoping she'll hand me the box. She shakes it for a few seconds, then hands it back to me. This silly goof. There's a tag on top of it. I flip it over to read what's on it.

“To Cassandra Watson

From Your Biggest Fan”

Haha. What a surprise. Makes me want to open it up right now. I pull on the wrapping to reveal

the box underneath. I lift the top of the box up and stare at the object inside. No way. I completely forgot about this thing. It fills me with a range of emotions and an air of nostalgia.

I reach into the box and pull out whatever's inside. This is… I let it drop from it's chain and stare at it. My pocket watch. It still has it's golden glow. The scar from the cut remains although it seems to have been repaired. I can even hear it ticking. I can hear Daphne "Oohing" and "Aahing" along with me. This is pretty cool. I grab the body and press on the button on top, flipping the device open and revealing the watch's face. It's fixed. The hands are moving as they should be. The other side however has something on it. The back cover has a photo on it now. Goodness, this photo is from years ago. It's Aion and I, together in the snow. How did they get a photo of *this?*

"Hey Daph, what makes you think this thing will be easy to find?" I set the watch down on my desk.

"Because I have the God of Opportunity on my side! Duh!"

"Duh!" I reply. We share a laugh. I point at the door and Daph takes the hint to prepare herself. She leaves my room. I take a bag off of one of the hooks where my jacket hangs and toss it around my back. What kind of things does one bring on a trip to the sea? Do we even need to bring anything if we're coming from Atlantis? Maybe a bikini for the beach and some sunscreen. Do I even have sunscreen? Man, I'll just ask Daphne to get it. I open my door and step out into the hall. The hollow path isn't empty anymore. There she is, standing off to the side with her arms crossed against the wall. The same feeling as always. Butterflies in my stomach and a giddiness I can't ever explain takes over my body every time I see her. I slowly approach her.

"I'm back." She speaks first.

"You're… You're b… home." I quietly reply. She turns towards me, smiling as she walks up to me.

"Daphne told me I was out for five days. You didn't want to come in with her? What, were you

afraid of visiting?" I say.

"Are you kidding? You have no idea what strings I had to pull to be allowed here in the first place! That evil *witch* Althea wouldn't let me so much as approach the door while you were resting. Everyone else got to stop by and drop of their little gifts." She sighs and shrugs her shoulders. "On top of that, despite knowing exactly when you would wake up, she didn't want me in the room when it happened. She said seeing me first might bring up some form of stress or trauma. As if! This is the closest I'm allowed to get until you left on your own. She told me if I really want to be there, I can hang out in the hall while Daphne eased you back into the real world."

"Aww, that's so sweet of her." I tease her. We laugh together.

"So, what do you know about that ship?" I ask.

"Only what Daphne knows. It has a cool name though doesn't it?" She asks me.

"It does!" I reply.

"Think she'll let me tag along?"

"Daph is cool don't worry. It's Althea we'll have to convince."

"Elementary, my dear Watson! Now, let's have a chat with Althea, shouldn't be too hard right?" She runs ahead into the hall, catching the attention of several Cat Sith. They run along side her excitedly. Her laughter rings sincere. I start running to catch up with her. I take her arm and hook it into mine.

This is a feeling I never want to go away. A feeling I never want to lose. It's real and so am I.

To whoever finds this diary, I hope you treat it well. If I'm still around, don't worry about returning it. This is a message for the future. Proof I existed. This is for you, as much as it is for me. Farewell, to those who live in far away times.

Fin

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The writer and editor of *All of Me* is Maiya Murasaki. The pen name is simply her name in Japanese. A Colorado native, she graduated with a Bachelor's of Arts in English with a Minor in Japanese from MSU Denver. In her free time she often writes to make her chimerical goal of becoming a novelist a reality. A traveling addict through and through, she gains inspiration from the Rocky Mountains in her backyard to the arcades and cafes of Tokyo to the mega malls of Manila. You may find additional information about her here at her website, www.velvetsea.moe

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

The illustrator for *All of Me* is Tomochan. She is a fledgling artist that graduated a Computer Science major. Rebelling against the fate she was given, she chases a forlorn dream of becoming a fully realised artist. She is responsible for drawing the various forms of Cassandra Watson, Aion, Daphne, Althea and all the other characters. In her free time she has a healthy interest in video games, draws various Virtual YouTubers while accepting commissions for specific characters. You may find additional information about her at the same website, www.velvetsea.moe