

# MEMORY WORK

A Legion Fanzine



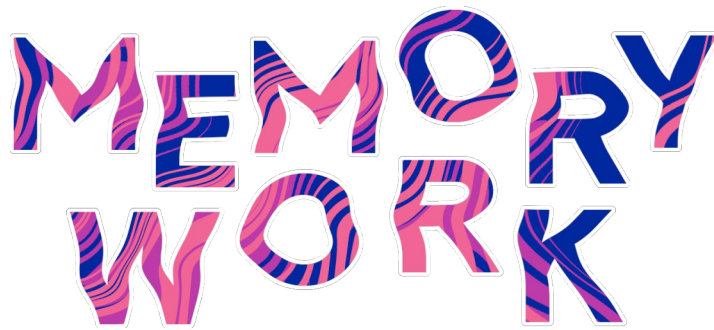
# MEMORY WORK

*A Legion Fanzine*

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## *About*



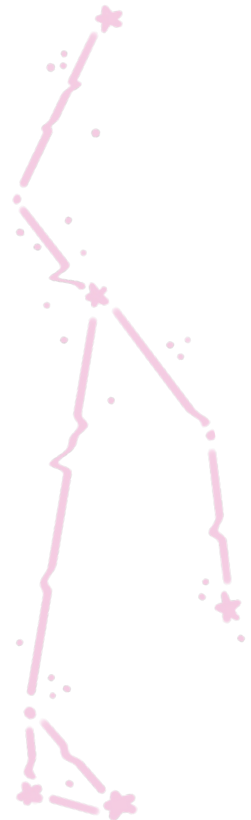
**Memory Work** is a *Legion* fanzine created to commemorate the completion of the TV series. Artists and writers from across the *Legion* Fandom have contributed wonderful works that capture their favorite aspects of the show and its characters.

The show may have ended, but the story goes on.

# TABLE of CONTENTS

## Illustrations

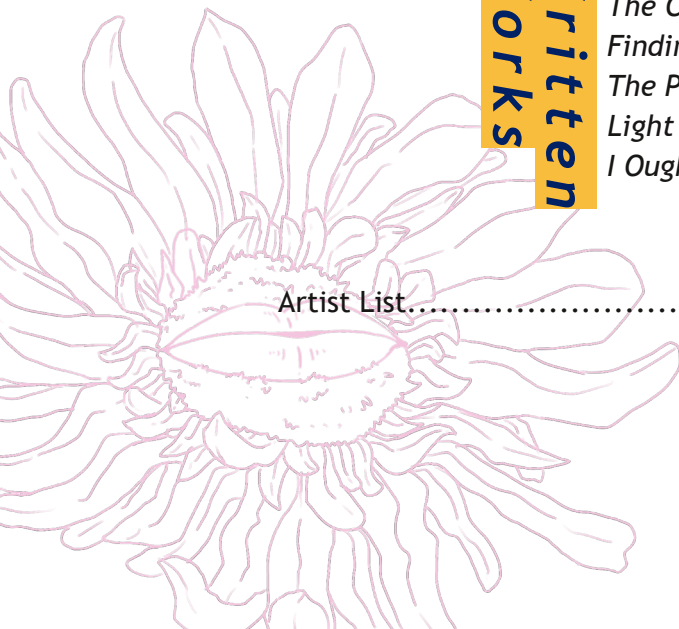
<i>David Haller</i> - JAHR.....	1
<i>Doctor Busker</i> - Julia August.....	2
<i>Portrait of a Traveler</i> - Allen Hernández.....	3
<i>Winter Light 1</i> - Mossomness.....	5
<i>Winter Light 2</i> - Mossomness.....	11
<i>Hexaflower</i> - Abigail Sins.....	18
<i>Memory of a Recorder</i> - Ram.....	19
<i>Syd</i> - JAHR.....	20
<i>We Are Legion</i> - lilmissrandom.....	24
<i>Legion Tarot</i> - Gabriel Holmes.....	25
<i>Time</i> - Giulia Busker.....	26
<i>Lenny Busker</i> - spacejeanss.....	27
<i>The Loudermilks</i> - liztuft.....	34
<i>Switch</i> - A. Kaake (Noteblue13).....	46
<i>Legion</i> - JAHR.....	47
<i>Lenny</i> - JAHR.....	48
<i>Legion</i> - 177.T.R.....	49
<i>Amahl Farouk</i> - Allen Hernández.....	69
<i>Lenny</i> - Ezra Rendleman.....	70
<i>Awakening</i> - Ram.....	71
<i>Cary and Kerry</i> - Kiyomizu37.....	72
<i>Kerry and Cary</i> - Peachie5000.....	87
<i>David and Ruth</i> - spacejeanss.....	88
<i>Cuddle Pile</i> - Hexiva.....	89



## Written Works

<i>Winter Light</i> - Versaphile.....	4
<i>The Complexity of David Haller</i> - Anna Everts.....	22
<i>Finding Mama Loudermilk</i> - Amy M. Weir.....	28
<i>The Principle of Bygones</i> - Amy M. Weir.....	35
<i>Light One Candle</i> - Hexiva.....	50
<i>I Ought to Know You Blind</i> - isoldewas.....	73

Artist List.....	90
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"A delusion starts like any other idea...



... as an egg."





*Doctor Busker - Julia August*





*Portrait of a Traveler - Allen  
Hernández*







David wakes up to a bright, even light from his window, and pushes aside the curtains to see snow. Lots of it, the whole yard and the forest beyond covered in deep drifts, white clinging to every branch and twig, soft flakes still falling in the wake of the night's storm. The sky is a haze of white.

"Laika, snow!" David says, delighted. "Look!"

Laika raises her head sleepily and gives a soft, huffing bark, unhappy from being woken up so early. When David climbs out of bed she gets up— But only so she can take the warmth he left behind.

"Laika," David pleads, but it's no use. She might be his dog but Laika does what she wants. But then he figures she earned it, being an astronaut and all.

David looks out the window again. He's so eager to get out there that he's tempted to just *be* outside right away, but he's not supposed to teleport on his own. And anyway he can't play in the snow in his pajamas.

He runs into his parents' bedroom. They're still asleep, like Laika, like everyone else he can hear, their thoughts soft and dreamy. He pauses for a moment, deciding, and then — Goes over to Mommy's side.

"Mommy?" he calls, softly. He calls again, then reaches out and touches her arm, gives it a light shake. "Mommy, wake up. There's snow!"

Mommy finally starts to stir, but even as she's waking up — Daddy wakes up, too. David stills, just for a moment, then feels the familiar, gentle brush of Daddy's mind against his. Everything's okay.

## Winter Light 1 - Mossomness





## *Versaphile*

"Snow?" Daddy says, squinting at the windows. Then he smiles, soft and warm. "Go downstairs and get dressed."

"Can Amy come?" David asks. "And Kerry?"

"Give them a call," Daddy says. "With the telephone. And make sure they get permission."

"Okay, okay," David sighs, but then runs out of the room. He glances at Laika again, curled up on the bed, then rushes down the stairs to the telephone. It would be easier to just reach out to Amy and Kerry's minds and talk to them without this clunky thing, but David's always being told to do things the same way everyone else does.

He calls Amy and the phone rings and rings. Finally it picks up.

"Hello?" Amy's daddy says, sounding barely awake. David can hear his thoughts easy, he's only down the street. 'Who's calling at this hour?'

"Uncle Simon?" David says. "It's David. Can Amy come play?"

There's a pause. 'Oh! It really came down last night. Ugh, gotta clear the driveway.' "She's still asleep. But I'm sure she'll want to when she wakes up."

David could wake Amy up himself, he could do it easy. But if he does, then Daddy will know, and he doesn't want to get in trouble when he could be out playing in the snow. "Okay," he says instead. "Tell her to bring her sled. And Kerry's coming too."

"I will," Uncle Simon says, with a tolerant fondness.

"Bye," David says, and hangs up the phone and picks it up again. He calls Kerry.

"Hello?" Cary says, as groggy as Uncle Simon.

"Cary?" David says. He doesn't call him Uncle Cary even though he's old, because he's Kerry's twin. Which means Kerry is old, but she's not. "It's David. Can Kerry come play?"

## *Winter Light*

There's a muffled sound David can't quite make out over the tinny telephone, but he hears Kerry in his head. Waking Cary up means waking Kerry up, which is fine by David.

"Hey David," Kerry says, taking over the phone. "Wow, the snow's so deep. Wanna sled?"

"Of course!" David says, grinning. "Amy's coming too."

"I'll be right over," Kerry says, and hangs up before David can reply.

David hears the creak of floorboards upstairs, and Daddy comes down the stairs, a robe over his pajamas. "How about some breakfast while we wait?"

Soon there's the warm smell of bread in the toaster, and butter sizzling in the pan as Daddy cracks some eggs. David feels a little less restless and a lot more hungry. Soon he hears Kerry's thoughts approaching, and Daddy pulls two more eggs from the carton. By the time there's a knock on the door, Kerry's eggs are almost done.

"Why aren't you ready?" Kerry asks, when he lets her in. She shakes off, sending bits of snow all over the entryway. She drops her sled on the floor.

"We have to wait for Amy," David explains. "But there's breakfast?"

"Ugh, she's so slow," Kerry whines, and heads for the kitchen. "Hey Charles."

"Good morning, Kerry," Daddy says, and slides her plate onto the table. "Would you like milk or orange juice?"

"Cream soda," Kerry says.

"It's a bit early for that," Daddy says.

"Cream soda!" Kerry insists.

Daddy raises his eyebrows. He pauses, and David can hear him asking Cary if it's all right to give Kerry cream soda with breakfast.

'It's fine,' Cary thinks back. 'I'm just glad she's eating.'



## *Versaphile*

Daddy opens a cabinet and pulls out a bottle of cream soda. He twists the cap open and puts the bottle in front of Kerry. Kerry takes it and greedily gulps it down.

David doesn't understand why it's okay for Daddy to not use the telephone when David has to. There's a lot of things he has to do the slow, boring way even though Daddy doesn't. But every time David complains, Daddy points out that Mommy does things the slow, boring way, and so do most people, and reminds David for the billionth time that it's important for him to do things the way everyone else does.

The three of them eat, and David wishes Mommy would come down but her thoughts feel so sleepy. Winter always makes her slow and tired, but when the spring comes she's happy again. Still, it's scary when Mommy's sick, he doesn't like it.

"You're going sledding?" Daddy asks.

David looks up and realizes he was just poking at his eggs instead of eating them. "Yeah, and we should build snowmen." He takes a bite. The toast is crispy and buttery, the scrambled eggs soft.

"We're gonna have a snowball fight and I'm gonna win," Kerry declares. She takes a nibble of her toast, makes a face, then pushes the toast off her plate. "When's Amy getting here?"

Daddy listens. "Ah, she's just waking up."

"Finally," Kerry sighs. She finishes her eggs and every last drop of the cream soda. "Laika!" she calls, loudly. "Hey, dog!"

There's a loud bark from upstairs, and then Laika comes trotting down to meet them. She's always happy to see Kerry, probably because she always gives Laika all her leftovers. This time she gets buttered toast and happily wolfs it down.

David hears Amy thinking about getting dressed, and excuses himself to do the same. He peeks in on Mommy, but she's curled up, mostly asleep, facing away from the light. David quickly pulls on warm clothes and heads back down. Amy's having breakfast, so David and Kerry grab their sleds and walk to her house.

## *Winter Light*

Laika trots behind them, mostly because she wants more of Kerry's leftovers. But she likes the snow, and shoves her nose down under it looking for smells.

David doesn't really remember how he saved Laika, he just knew she was scared and wanted to go home, so he brought her home. That was two years ago. Everyone thinks she died in space, but she's alive and wants more buttery toast.

"Laika!" Amy greets, as Laika barks and jumps up to give her dog-kisses. Amy might be Laika's favorite person, but that's all right because Amy might be David's favorite person, too. She's definitely his favorite cousin.

When Laika's done, Amy wipes her face with her coat sleeve. David takes his turn, coming up to Amy for one of her hugs. They always make him feel better.

"C'moon," Kerry whines, impatient. "I wanna get to the park first!"

David listens. "There's already someone there." A few kids, one trudging up the sledding hill, two sledding down it together.

"Ugh!" Kerry moans.

"We'll sled faster once the snow's compacted," Amy says, reasonably.

They reach the park and there's a few more kids already there. Kerry marches off to the fresh snow at first, but then comes back. They all scream with delight as they sled down the compacted snow, then trudge back up the hill even though David could just teleport them to the top.

The rest of the neighborhood kids wake up, and soon the sledding hill is crowded. Kerry hates having to wait, and all the noisy minds close together make David restless, even though he can concentrate to block most of them out.

"Let's go get some hot chocolate," Amy says, and they trudge back down the hill and over to the park's concession stand.

They brush the snow off a park bench and sit together, and David breathes in the hot, sweet steam, and eats the little marshmallows before they dissolve. He sips his hot chocolate and takes slow breaths, focusing on what's around them. There's a duck pond nearby; it's all frozen over except for where it's fed by a stream, and the ducks cluster around the small patch of open water, quacking and splashing. Laika



## *Versaphile*

watches them intently. Flocks of geese fly overhead, even noisier than the ducks.

With everyone sledding, it's easy to find a stretch of deep, fresh snow. They use their sleds to carry heaps of snow, and start building. First snowmen (and a snow dog), and then Kerry demands a sturdy snow fort filled with ammunition. Other kids follow the same path from the sledding hill to the hot chocolate to the field they've been playing in. 'Snowball fight,' starts running through everyone's thoughts, and tension builds. And then the snowballs start to fly.

The three of them duck behind their fort, but Laika runs out and leaps for the snowballs, barking with delight. Kerry's aim is deadly, even making a few kids cry. Amy only aims for the older kids. David throws his snowballs wildly, not really wanting to hit anyone when he'll have to feel them being upset. But mostly everyone's happy, especially Laika.

After the fight, the four of them trudge home. They're tired and wet and chilled and Laika's fur is covered in clumps of snow. Amy and Kerry split off to go change and have lunch, and promise to come over later. David brushes Laika off before they go inside, and Daddy greets them with towels and helps David out of his wet clothes. Daddy starts drying Laika off. David goes to his bedroom and puts on dry clothes and a warm, fluffy sweater, and finally notices that Mommy's awake.

He goes back downstairs and finds her in her favorite spot, on the couch near the big window. She smiles when she sees him. David snuggles up with her and she drapes one end of her blanket around him.

"Did you have a good time in the park?" Mommy asks.

"Yeah," David sighs. He closes his eyes and rests his head against her.

"Tired?" she asks. "Here, lie down."

Mommy guides him to lie with his head on her lap. She strokes her fingers through his damp hair. Outside there's still a light snow falling, and everything is calm. Laika, freshly dried, hops up on the couch and rests her head on David's legs.

When David wakes, Daddy's made chicken soup and hot apple tea with cinnamon. They sit together at the table, and David tells his parents about the sledding hill, and the snowball fight, and Laika and the ducks. And then he tells Daddy about how noisy everyone's minds were.

## Winter Light

"Your powers keep getting stronger," Daddy says. "I think we should do some extra shielding practice."

"But Kerry and Amy are coming over," David protests.

"They can come over a little later," Daddy says. "In fact, how about we invite everyone over for dinner?" He turns to Mommy. "How does that sound? Some warm company? Fire in the fireplace?"

Mommy hesitates, then nods. "It would be nice," she admits. "I'll have to make myself presentable."

"A hot bath?" Daddy offers. "I'll take care of everything."

Mommy smiles and kisses Daddy. David can feel her feeling better, feeling cared for, and it makes him feel better. Love makes everyone feel better.



*Winter Light Illustration 2 - Mossomness*

While Mommy's bathing upstairs, Daddy and David sit together on the couch, eyes closed. Laika's curled up on the floor, half-dozing.

"Picture a dome around your mind," Daddy says, voice calm and even. "It's strong and sturdy. Nothing can get inside unless you want it to."

David pictures the dome. Usually he thinks about concrete or brick, but today it's made of thick, strong ice. He looks up through it, and the light is bright and soft.

"There are things outside the dome," Daddy continues. "People's thoughts, their feelings. But they can't get through the dome, no matter how hard they try."

David pictures the thoughts he hears sliding off the dome and falling away. The noisy thoughts grow softer, muffled, and it's a relief.



## *Versaphile*

When David's ready, Daddy says, "I'm going to try to push through the dome now. Don't let me in."

"Okay," David breathes. The dome is strong and sturdy. Nothing can get inside it unless he wants it to.

He feels the press of Daddy's mind, testing. The pressure grows and grows, but David's dome holds strong.

"Very good," Daddy praises. "Your shielding's getting stronger, too. But you have to remember to use it, to protect yourself. Think about the park, all those minds around you."

"I can hear it," David says. Not just the memory, but the park now, and the kids playing there, thinking about how the hill is all slushy and muddy now, and how they should have gone sledding earlier.

"Good," Daddy says. "Now block them out. Keep them completely out of the dome."

David pictures the dome again, pictures himself on the hill but protected, the noise growing softer and softer, the ice growing stronger and stronger. And then — Silence. Just his own breathing, in and out.

David never likes it when things are this quiet. But for the practice, he holds it until Daddy says he can let go.

Afterwards, Daddy gives him a big hug. "You're doing so well, David," he says, proud. "I love you very much."

David can feel how much Daddy means it, and he hugs back, cheek pressed against Daddy's shirt.

After practice, David plays with Laika for a while. Mommy comes back down, and then she calls for him to help them in the kitchen. Laika bounds up ahead of him, because cooking means food dropped on the floor, and the promise of more food later.

## *Winter Light*

The Hallers arrive first, then Kerry and Cary, and then Uncle Oliver and Aunt Melanie teleport right into the kitchen, dressed in colorful, drapey clothes and smelling of spices.

"We brought samosas," Uncle Oliver declares, cheerful as always. "Hello everyone!"

"Sorry we're late," Aunt Melanie says. "You know how Oliver is when he's cooking."

"Melanie, it's so good to see you," Mommy says, and they hug.

"How have you been?" Aunt Melanie asks.

"All right, I suppose," Mommy says. "Winter's always so difficult."

Laika jumps all over Uncle Oliver and he laughs. Then Laika sees some speck of dropped food and rushes off to eat it.

"David," Uncle Oliver says, turning to him. "I have a Chanukah present for you. A little late, but —"

David glances at Daddy to make sure it's okay, and Daddy nods. David takes the wrapped box from Uncle Oliver, and Kerry and Amy watch over his shoulders, curious. David tears open the paper and reveals a pretty wooden box. He opens the latch and inside is — He's not sure what it is. A tangled knot of metal inside a large glass orb.

"It's a puzzle," Uncle Oliver explains. "Designed to be solved using telekinesis."

"Oh, that's a wonderful gift," Aunt Ruth says, impressed. "How does it work?"

Uncle Oliver stares at the orb and it lifts up into the air. "You take it," he tells David.

"Go ahead," Daddy says.

David feels a rush of excitement. Finally! Holding back all the time is so boring. He easily takes control of the orb and turns the knot inside it, and tugs randomly at the metal loops.



## *Versaphile*

"This one's quite a challenge," Uncle Oliver advises. "But when you solve it, I'll give you a new one that's even harder."

"Thanks, Uncle Oliver," David says, grinning.

"I wanna puzzle too!" Kerry says, pouting.

"Oliver, could you?" Cary asks.

Uncle Oliver puts his hand on his beard, considering. And then he reaches behind his back and pulls out two more wrapped boxes. He gives one to Kerry and one to Amy, and they each unwrap eagerly.

"You're such a tease, Oliver," Mommy says, shaking her head.

The puzzles Amy and Kerry get are different, and aren't inside of orbs. Kerry's puzzle is made of loops of glass, and Amy's is a wooden box.

"You'll have to be very clever to open that," Uncle Oliver tells Amy. "But of course you're very clever."

Amy blushes. "Thanks, Uncle Oliver."

"How do I get this open?" Kerry asks, frowning at hers. "If I pull too hard it'll break."

"That's why it's glass," Uncle Oliver says. "You have to be delicate."

"Boring," Kerry pouts.

"Wonderful," Cary says, approving. "Of course, if you don't want it, I'd be happy to —"

"No!" Kerry says, right away. "I'm gonna solve mine first!"

"Let's eat," Daddy says. "These samosas smell amazing."

Everyone squeezes together at the table. Even with the extra leaf in it's a tight fit, but David likes having everyone together like this, happy and warm. It makes him feel a little floaty.

## *Winter Light*

"David, are you getting taller?" Uncle Simon asks.

David looks down and realizes he's actually floating an inch above his chair. "Oops," he says, and floats back down. All the adults laugh fondly.

After dinner, Daddy lights the fireplace and everyone gathers around it. David, Amy, and Kerry sit on the floor with their puzzles, but Uncle Oliver was right, they are very tricky. David starts yawning and sets his aside, and leans against Mommy's leg. Laika curls up with him and he dozes.

"—come with us," Aunt Melanie says, as David drifts awake. Even with his eyes closed, he can feel that the Hallers and Kerry and Cary have gone home. Uncle Oliver and Aunt Melanie are still here, though. Uncle Oliver's with Daddy, talking about — India. Mutants. Summerland.

"I don't know," Mommy says. "Charles is afraid it will be too much for me. And for David."

"He's growing up so fast," Aunt Melanie says. "It will be good for him, to grow up with other mutants."

"He has Charles," Mommy says. "And Cary and Kerry. And his family."

"And he can still have all of that," Aunt Melanie says. "But it's time. And I think Summerland would be good for you. All this cold and dark —"

"I know," Mommy sighs. "I just feel so — And we're safe here."

"We're doing amazing work there," Aunt Melanie says. "Telepathy and mental health I think we could help you."

"Charles tried," Mommy says, and David can feel her unhappiness. "And after the pregnancy —"

"You've worked so hard to heal," Aunt Melanie says, gently. "I know. But you two shouldn't have to deal with this alone. Let us help you."

Mommy considers it. "I take it Oliver is giving Charles the same speech?"

## Versaphile

"Yes," Aunt Melanie admits, with a flush of embarrassment.

"Divide and conquer," Mommy says, wryly. "Charles and I will talk about it. We need to make the best choice for David. That's what's most important."

David hears flashes of Mommy's thoughts about the David that never was. Mommy and Daddy don't like to talk about that David, and Daddy hides his thoughts if he doesn't want David to hear them, but Mommy can't. So David knows there was another David who was — Who was hurt and came to Mommy and Daddy with his friends to stop himself from being hurt. And that David became — Himself.

David doesn't know what to think about that. It's all pretty weird. But maybe weird stuff just comes with being a mutant. Like having an astronaut dog and floating at dinner. Those things are okay, so maybe the other stuff is okay, too.

And it worked, what the other David did. It must have, because David's happy.

He opens his eyes and rubs his cheek against Mommy's leg. "Mommy?"

Mommy reaches down and pulls him up, and David climbs onto her lap. He rests against her, feeling the warmth of her body, her love for him. *Mommy*.

"My darling boy," Mommy murmurs, and kisses his head.

David dozes again, and then the next thing he knows, Daddy's carrying him up the stairs.

"Are we gonna move?" David asks, sleepily, as Daddy helps him into his pajamas.

'Can't keep a secret from you,' Daddy thinks, wryly. "Maybe. To a place where there's a lot more people like us. Would that be all right?"

"I dunno," David says. He's happy here, with his family and Laika and his friends. But — He's tired of pretending to be normal when he knows he's different.

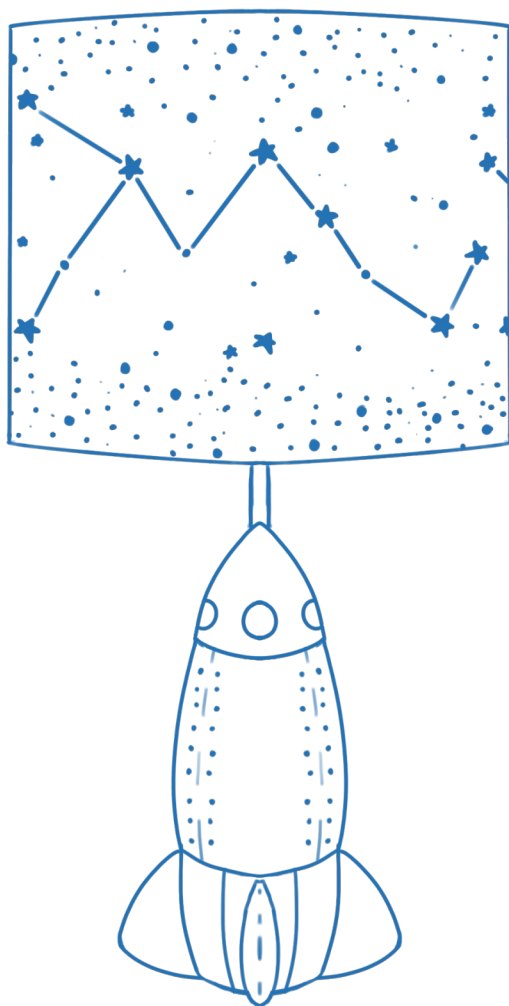
"We'll talk about it in the morning," Daddy soothes, and tucks David into bed.

Before he leaves, Daddy turns on the rocket lamp that David got for his birthday last year, from Amy. It's a silver rocket with red fins and a blue cone, and a blue shade that casts little stars all over his room. David loves it.



## *Winter Light*

"Sweet dreams, my dear boy." Daddy kisses David's head and walks out, closing the door softly behind him. David falls asleep to the soft creaking of the turning lampshade, and the deep, gentle love of his parents.



Hexaflower - Abigail Sins





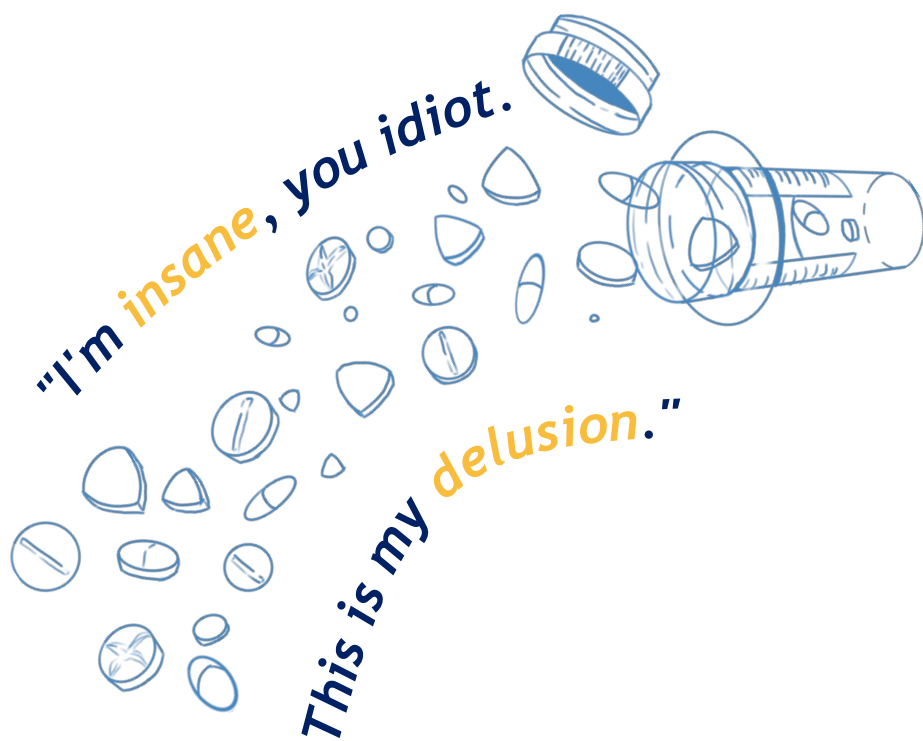
*Memory of a Recorder - Ram*



Peter Pawarq  
2020









Poem

## ***The Complexity of David Haller***

Anna Everts

where once was one  
then was two  
then came  
the rest of the crew  
with trouble inside  
and outside too  
he blew his mind  
his power grew  
would he be kind  
or cause upheaval?  
a good loving person  
or just plain evil?  
scars on his heart  
could only tell  
the hurt he has suffered  
how hard he fell  
the world watches closely  
they cower, in fear  
but are things as ever  
what they appear?  
not a real hero  
but a villain? not quite  
one thing is certain  
he puts up a fight  
against his oppressors  
his trauma, his hurt  
then when it's over  
dusts off the dirt



## *The Complexity of David Haller*

for power is tricky  
and so is the brain  
the mind's eerie rumble  
hallucinations' feign  
so try and be him  
for one single day  
see how you're doing  
what game you'd play  
to him there are layers  
one's right, one's wrong  
but one thing is certain  
he's in every way strong.







## Legion Tarot - Gabriel Holmes

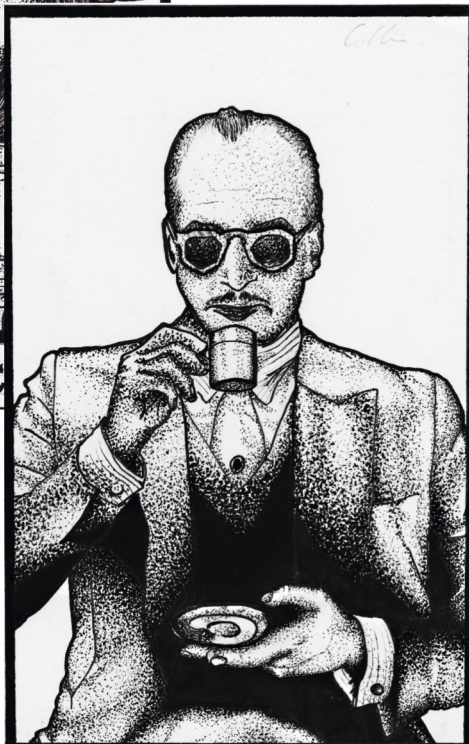


*The Admiral*

“When we encounter  
coincidence,  
we often see conspiracy”



*The Hatter*



*- Rex Umbra*

### Legion Tarot Card Series

A few of my favourite characters from Legion, drawn in a tarot card style.  
Left to right: 'The Admiral', 'The Hatter' and 'Rex Umbra' (The shadow king)  
Gabriel Holmes  
@Gabriel.h\_ink  
U/Gabriel\_Holmes







*Lenny Busker - spacejeanss*





Essay

## ***Finding Mama Loudermilk: or, How I Got to Know the Best Parent in the Legion FX Universe***

Amy M. Weir

This show has a strong recurring theme of the importance of children feeling wanted by their parents. So many of the characters have emotional hangups tracing back to even the *impression* of being abandoned or neglected in childhood. And yet, the one—er, two...ish—characters whose father we know *outright* rejected and abandoned them are arguably the most emotionally well-adjusted in the show (at least until Farouk-and-company get to them at the beginning of Season 2). Granted, they’ve had about three times longer to get over their childhood traumas than, say, Syd has, and they’ve always had each other as a built-in support system, but I can’t imagine they did it alone, not in a universe that’s devoted whole episodes to the importance of a loving childhood home. *Somebody* was picking up that deadbeat dad’s slack. I sense an extraordinarily loving Mama in the Loudermilk Twins’ past.

In Lenny’s mental prison, it doesn’t take much to convince everyone else that they have a reason to be shut up in a mental hospital, but Cary and Kerry laugh it off —*they’re* not the ones with a problem with who they are. *They’re weird and they’re okay with that*. How did they ever gain such self-acceptance in a world where they clearly don’t fit in, either as individuals (a massive nerd whose mere appearance broke up his parents’ marriage? A ruthless warrior who’s repulsed by normal everyday things like eating and using the restroom?), or especially as a unit? Somebody must have made a point of accepting them for exactly who they were, of standing up to those who refused to accept them. Somebody must have encouraged them in the pursuit of their highly-skilled interests, and the love, and patience, and trust they have for each other must have been modeled. They had a thoroughly supportive home life. Of this I was sure.

So *what* if their dad didn’t accept them? That left an *extra-determined* mom.

Maybe I’m projecting. I’m a mom— a mom to a timid, geeky big brother and a tenacious, chaotic-neutral little sister. I’m not a single mom, but my husband’s never been nearly as involved in their upbringing as I have, and I often feel it’s all

## *Finding Mama Loudermilk*

on me. My kids call me “Mama,” even though I’d never chosen that name—I’d always referred to myself as “Mommy” or “Mummy.” And when I started writing fanfics about the Loudermilks’ childhood, *they* started calling their mother “Mama,” too, without me realizing right away why I’d thought that.

But I did put *conscious* thought into her, too. Who must Irma Loudermilk-Whitecloud have *been*, for her exceedingly odd children to have grown up so successful and self-accepting?

Smart and scientifically-minded like her son (though maybe not as much). Tough and stubborn like her daughter (though maybe not as much). Practical and determined. She probably would have gone into science herself if her gender and ethnicity and circumstances had allowed it at that time, so she settled for being a secretary at a research facility, and teaching Cary in the evenings. But not in a pushy, you-must-excel-at-school sort of way, in an I-too-find-this-interesting-and-I-can-help-you-learn sort of way.

She encouraged him to be exactly who he was, demonstrating enough unconditional acceptance to transcend the negative insinuations from others (including his own father) that he just didn’t fit. She treated his curiosity with respect and his vocabulary likewise. She taught him outright: no matter how the world tries to shame you, you have nothing to be ashamed of.

But she was only human, too. When I tried to imagine her grappling with the news that the daughter she’d once expected had been living literally inside her son all along, “Oh, that’s very interesting! Welcome, Kerry!” just didn’t feel realistic. There was too much baggage tied up in the circumstances of Cary’s birth, too much stress from just day-to-day single-motherhood, and, ironically, she loved her son too much not to be frightened of the possible implications. She was running on the fear that somebody would decide she couldn’t raise Cary properly and take him away from her, and the more I thought about it, the more I realized this wasn’t paranoia, but seeped in the real history of Native American children being taken from their parents and “rehabilitated” in institutional schools.

Here’s where my own baggage, or lack-thereof, comes in. I am white, grew up in an overwhelmingly-white community, in Southwestern Pennsylvania at that. It wouldn’t be entirely accurate to say there is *no* Native American population in Southwestern Pennsylvania, but those that are moved here from somewhere else, and most of them are as Native American as I am Slovak: by blood, not culture, let alone by actual tribal citizenship. I *did* grow up under the impression that there



were no more “Indians,” that they’d all died off (by perfectly natural causes of course) hundreds of years ago. But now I am an at-least-in-the-process-of-being-marginally-Woke children’s librarian, and I am quite familiar with the work of Dr. Debbie Reese. She’s the leading authority on Native American representation in children’s literature. She advocates for positive, #OwnVoices representation on one hand, but she eviscerates the slightest taint of stereotypical or ignorant references in any other work. I suddenly felt like Dr. Reese was breathing down my neck: *what gives you the right to think you can write about people of a culture not your own?* “It’s just fanfic?” I nervously told the imaginary specter of Dr. Reese. “It wasn’t my idea to make them Native! I just wanted to explore their unique relationship!” Imaginary-Dr.-Reese glared at me for a few moments, then said, *Well, try not to be TOO ignorant. And remember, TRIBE FIRST.*

Tribe First, meaning, “Native American” isn’t the homogeneous catch-all fantasy culture it so often is portrayed as and preschoolers still get taught /about come Thanksgiving time (I visited a school in the middle of such a lesson just last week. I cringed. Dr. Reese would have had THINGS TO SAY). But Kerry never mentioned their tribe, just that they were Native. How could I be as un-ignorant as possible about this? I needed to find them a tribe, to root them in some real place. For some reason—maybe it’s Cary’s habits of suits and sweater-vests—I just couldn’t see them coming from a warm climate, so Southwest US (which is the first place I think of when I picture modern active Native culture) was right out. *Northwest* didn’t seem right, either. I looked at a map of current Native population distribution/reservation locations and thought, *bam*, Northern Plains. Maybe that was a subconscious connection to Noah Hawley’s other show, *Fargo*, but it just felt right. Lakota Sioux, I decided. Common and widespread enough— I was less likely to write something ignorant than if I picked something smaller and more specific. But they didn’t live in one of the Dakotas, that was too many -Akotas for me, and they didn’t live in Minnesota, because that would have been a little *too* blatant a tie to *Fargo*. Eastern Montana. And if you asked me now I’d probably tell you confidently that the Loudermilks *are* Lakota Sioux from Eastern Montana and completely forget that this isn’t actually canon. (Later I found out Amber Midthunder actually *is* from Montana. Possibly I’d seen that once before and it stuck somewhere in my subconscious. Or it’s just meant to be. Either way).

So I did some research. I was aware enough that Native children being forcibly separated from their parents was a thing that probably would have influenced Irma’s feelings about raising Cary, but I didn’t know the details. One of the clearest and most interesting resources I read was *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States for Young People* by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, adapted for “Young

## Finding Mama Loudermilk

People”\*\* by Dr. Debbie Reese herself (Beacon Press, 2019).

The residential Indian School system was set up in the late 1800s as a comparably humane alternative to physically warring over land. It was still rooted in the concept of Manifest Destiny, that the European settlers-now-US-government *deserved* to control the entire continent and couldn't *possibly* share it with the governments that had already been there: “Hey,” said some kind-hearted but startlingly ignorant folks, “how about instead of *killing off* all the Indians, we just teach them all to give up their cultures and become like us? Then we won't have to share the continent anymore!” In some ways many of the Natives considered it a good deal—get their kids an education, give them skills for survival in the White Man's World. But in practice it often got ugly, because the schools were determined to scrub every trace of Indian out of them. The idea of the boarding schools was to get the kids as far away from their tribes as possible, even placing them with white families over vacations, and punish them for using any language other than English, until they had forgotten or rejected their past. If a family protested, the kids would just be taken to the schools by force.

The boarding school system lasted far longer than I realized, with attendance in the tens of thousands still in the 1970s. Now, the actual place in time occupied by *Legion*-the-show is nebulous at best, but even if it takes place in the present day, this means there's still a decent chance Cary himself would have gone through this system. But I don't think he did: the forced-separation aspect of it would have been exactly the sort of childhood trauma that, by *Legion*'s standards, would have messed him up psychologically for far longer than he ever seemed to be. Though Cary and Kerry have a lot of anxiety when they are separated from each *other*, there's more of a “I don't like the way this feels right now” flavor to it than “they're trying to tear us apart!” Not what you'd expect from people once torn away from their mother.

I think it's more likely that *Irma* went through the system in the 1930s and 40s (again, assuming a relatively modern-day setting), learned to act “white,” but stayed bitter about it enough to decide she did not want her own children sent away. I see her purposely settling *near* but not *on* the reservation, close enough to be near family, but in mainstream America enough to convince any meddling government officials that she was *perfectly* assimilated so there was no *need* for her son to leave home, not at all, he even *looks* like a white kid, and he's absolutely thriving in the local public school, look, he skipped two grades!\*\* The authorities were much more likely to let a kid stay at their local school if they were doing well there, and Cary had no problem doing well at school.

But even when a Native child didn't attend a boarding school, the ethnic-cleansing spirit behind the system continued through individual child removals, under the apparently well-intentioned auspices of putting children from "troubled" homes into "better" ones. In practice, that meant a "properly civilized" European-American home as opposed to a "savage" Native one—no matter what the actual quality of that home life was. The Indian Child Welfare Act, which curbed this practice by insisting that foster and adoptive placements be found in a child's own tribe, and if not there than in a still-Native family, didn't pass until 1978, when even a modern-day Cary Loudermilk would have been an adult. Before then, according to the book, "between 25 and 35 percent of all Native children had been removed from their homes and communities by state and county social service agencies....'Welfare workers and social workers who are handling child welfare caseloads use any means available...to get the children away from mothers they think are not fit.'" (p 190-191) Well sheesh. With odds like that, it would have been a miracle for a Native single mom in the 1950s to have kept hold of her little blond genius with possibly dissociative mental issues.

Kerry notes their parents' name as "Whitecloud," but they're obviously not going by that now, and maybe "Loudermilk" was an adoptive family's name. But I doubt that for multiple reasons, primarily, still, the lack of separation-induced trauma. It might have been Irma's maiden name, which she reverted to after her divorce. But most likely it was a deliberate change to a name that wasn't quite so *obviously* Native—it's now "C-loud-the-color-of-milk." It could have been Irma's idea, so as to avoid awkward questions and/or unwanted attention from racist social workers, or it could have been changed *by* an assimilation-minded institution—say, when she first registered Cary at the public school— but if that gave her an edge in keeping her family together, she would have gone along with it.

Irma then-Whitecloud-now-Loudermilk, like her daughter after her, was a *fighter*. She fought through the sting of her marriage falling apart, fought to get a job that would support herself and her child in an era when women were supposed to be housewives, fought to earn enough to avoid having to seek any aid from government services that might decide she's not a fit parent, fought to build her son up in a world that could find so many excuses to tear him down.

So when he all of a sudden starts talking about a girl-Kerry who talks to him all the time, you really must forgive her for not taking it that well. She had worked too hard to keep him for him to be carted off to an insane asylum now. Her loving and accepting tendencies had to be tempered by her practical, separation-traumatized

## Finding Mama Loudermilk

tendencies. It would have been a struggle to reconcile the two instincts, to find the line between believing her child...ren and protecting them from the consequences of their inconceivable reality.

But Kerry is nothing if not persistent. Eventually Irma would have to admit that this spunky little girl was neither an imaginary friend nor a delusion. She could pretend it wasn't happening, she could worry what the neighbors would think, but she wouldn't be able to help loving her, imaginary or not.

And that's why I've come to love Irma so much. Here was someone who, despite hardship and dangers, truly loved her two very different (from each other *and* from everyone else) children in an active way, encouraging them to be the best *them* they could be. For a character that canonically has just a brief, unspoken flashback appearance, she's got a lot of depth when you start to look into her. And so she is my nomination for Best Parent in the *Legion* TV Universe.

The fic I've submitted to *Memory Work* here is what came out after I'd written a lot of Loudermilk childhood fic\*\*\*\* and gotten to know Irma so well. I wanted to know how their relationship continued once they'd successfully built Summerland—I wanted to know how Mama kept up with them for the rest of her life. I wanted some closure. And somehow, once I started writing, it wound up being closure for more than just Mama.

\*It's officially YA, if you want to know the right age level to hand it to. It would make the most perfect amount of sense in a middle school library. Of course, it's a good clear read for *anyone* regardless of age who wants a basic understanding of the relationship between Native American nations and the US government, like, for example, me.

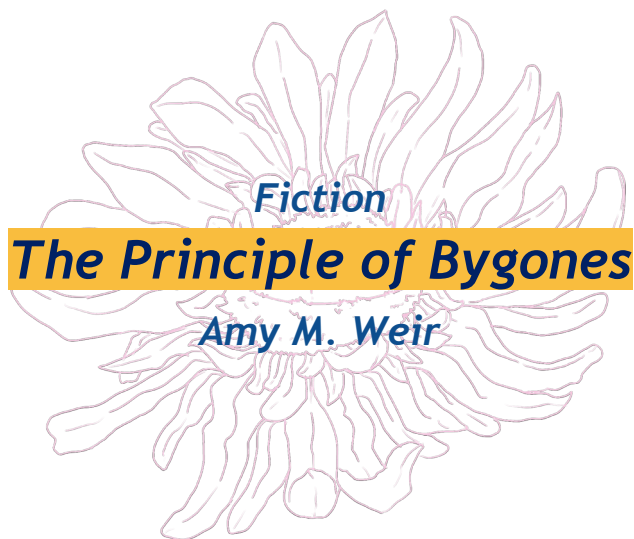
\*\*Okay, I made up the part about him skipping two grades. That's another bit of headcanon I forget isn't actual canon. But it's *likely*.

\*\*\*I suppose one could make an argument for Mr. "Pops" Wallace, too. He also had to pick up the pieces as a single parent after his wife's death, and his son ended up pretty cool. It's not his fault the poor guy can't forget anything, ever. But I haven't given him nearly as much thought.

\*\*\*\*They can all be found on AO3 as "The Loudermilk Chronicles" series by Rockinlibrarian.







Are you sure there's nothing I can do? I am a doctor."

"You're a PhD."

"Several times over, and I know medicine isn't my specialty but I've done a lot of work in recent years on a human cellular level, and what is cancer but an out of control mutation?"

"Cary, I appreciate the thought, but my time is up. I'm okay with that. I'd just like to spend some time with you two before I go."

Kerry slid out sideways until she was holding the phone. "If cancer had a face, I'd have pulped it by now."

"I have no doubt." Mama chuckled a little. "And I appreciate that thought as well. Let me know when I get to see *your* face again. There's room at Aunt Lucy's for all of us to stay for awhile."

Once they hung up the phone, Kerry busted several holes in her punching bag and Cary didn't even admonish her for it. His grief was as quiet and still as hers was angry and rough, but it was the same grief. Just like the two of them. Apparently different, fundamentally the same.

After a few minutes of simply sitting while she grunted and roared at the bag across the room, he spoke up. "I just wonder if we were wrong to leave her alone out there. I mean, maybe we should have stayed in Montana, to take care of her, it's our, our duty to care for our elders as they grow old, and... we weren't there."

"She could have come here. You offered."

*Amy M. Weir*

“But her sisters and brothers, her whole family...everyone except us—”

“We’re the most important.”

“You joke, but —”

“I never joke.”

“That’s —that’s true, but to be honest, Mama didn’t really fit in there once we came along, any more than we did. We sort of... wrecked her life. And now we’re the only ones who don’t hold her at a bit of a distance. I’m sure Aunt Lucy is taking good care of her but...she needs *us*.”

“Melanie needs us, too.”

“She can do without us for a few months. And she can wait, if that’s all Mama has left-”

“Don’t even say that!”

Cary was about to tell her not to hide from the truth, when he noticed she’d already abandoned the punching bag and was now fishing in a cupboard.

She pulled out their suitcase and tossed it at him. “Let’s go, let’s move, chop chop old man! Mama needs us.”

He fumbled the suitcase and gave her a half smile. “We *do* have time to wrap up a few things before we leave, you know.”

“Who cares? We’re all Mama’s got.”

---

The door to Aunt Lucy’s apartment was opened by a tall, wrinkled-yet-rugged-looking old man, who’d already said, “Cary,” before Cary could recognize him. Then his stomach flipped.

“D-Dad?”



## *The Principles of Bygones*

Ray? Kerry refused to use the honorific the man had never done a thing to earn. *What's HE doing here?*

"Glad you could make it. It means a lot to your mother to have you here."

Cary struggled to form words. "But what are...when did y...why...?"

"Your mama's a lot for your Aunt Lucy to handle all by herself, so I've been sitting in." He smiled sadly. "I know we've had our problems, but I love your mother, always have, and I'm gonna be here for her."

"Great, should have thought of that fifty-two years ago." Kerry slipped out and pushed past Ray into the room. "Where's Mama?"

Ray stared after her, agape. "Who was that?" he mouthed to Cary.

Cary smothered a nervous giggle. "Kerry." Well, this would certainly be... complicated. He hoisted the suitcase and followed her inside.

He was relieved to find Mama sitting up and smiling. Thinner, wanner, more wrinkled, but fully present. There was a teasing bounce in her voice as she kissed Kerry and told her, "You haven't changed a bit. It always makes me feel so young. *There's* my handsome nuclear physicist!" She reached her free hand out to her son. "Oh, it's so good to have you both back with me."

Ray hung back in the doorway, looking bemused. "Irma, why did you never tell me we had a granddaughter?"

Mama did a bit of a spit-take, and said, laughing, "I don't even know where to begin with that question."

"I can think of several good reasons off the top of my head," Cary offered nervously.

"'Cause you abandoned us, first of all."

"Kerry!" Cary snapped. Mama winced.

"What, I only said what everybody's thinking."

## Amy M. Weir

Ray sighed. “I know I have a lot to answer for, but let’s...try not to upset Mama right now?”

Mama smiled a bit sadly and said, “You three have an awful lot to talk about, and I don’t want to keep you from it. I just want a good hello and how do from my babies here first, then you all can head to the kitchen and let me rest.”

“When you’re ready, then.” Ray nodded once, then ducked into the kitchen.

Cary tried to focus on Mama. “How are you? Is there anything we can get you?”

“I have everything I need now. What is new with you two? Meet any interesting superpowered people lately?”

They looked at each other, and exchanged a few noncommittal phrases: “Idaknow —” “Just the usual, really” “Nothing much exciting” “Well there was that young man with the memory thing-” “Well he’s been there —” “I guess....” And then they trailed off, sneaking glances at the door to the kitchen.

After a few more awkward seconds, Mama raised her eyebrows and crossed her arms. “All right. We can’t get past the elephant in the room here —or in the kitchen —can we.”

Kerry looked confused, and Cary told her, “Dad,” quickly.

“Let whatever you have to say out,” Mama said.

“Okay, I have questions.” Kerry stood up and began to pace. “First of all, *how can you even look* at that man after what he did to us? Left us on the edge of poverty, just assuming someone would pay you enough to feed us? Refused to believe you and made you out to be the bad guy so everyone in town would whisper about you and make comments right to our face? Let you live in constant fear that someone would decide a Native single mom couldn’t raise a weirdo blond kid and take us away? Treated Cary like absolute crap just because he thought we weren’t *his*?”

Mama glanced at Cary and raised her eyebrows, as if giving him permission to put in his own two cents. “I-I-I have the same questions, to be honest,” he admitted, “but slightly less vitriol.”

## *The Principles of Bygones*

Mama sighed. “The answer is time. Fifty years erodes quite a lot of edge down. And he genuinely regrets leaving. He’s sorry and I’ve accepted his apology. Look, I don’t have much time left, and I don’t want to waste any of it on grudges. There is a lot I love about your father, and I’ve missed that. So we’ve chosen to let bygones be bygones and just live.”

Cary nodded. “That makes sense.”

“No it doesn’t,” Kerry retorted.

“I know, it’s a lot to handle. But just give him a chance to talk it out with you. He really wants to make amends before I’m gone.”

“I don’t like a single thing you just said.”

“Kerry.” Mama reached out and beckoned her into a hug. “We can’t change the past. But we can make *now* the best we can make it. That’s all I’m asking for. Give him a *chance*.”

“We will,” Cary said quickly, with a warning look at Kerry. “Because you’ve asked us.”

“I’ll accept that reasoning. Do it for me.” There was another pause, then Mama waved them away. “Go, go get the elephant out of the room, then!”

“Stop saying that! You get my hopes up!”

Mama practically cackled as she shooed them away. Kerry continued, “What? Like *you* haven’t always wanted to fight an elephant?”

---

Mama’d always gotten along with her former inlaws, and they enjoyed being grandparents to Cary, often taking care of him while Mama was at work, teaching him their culture and history. So what he knew of the man whom Mama had always insisted was his father came through chance encounters at Kungsi and Kaka’s house. Cary knew who Ray Whitecloud was *supposed* to be, but the one time he’d instinctively called him “Daddy” to his face, the man had snapped, “Don’t call me that,” and completely ignored the really interesting piece of shale Cary’d been trying to show him.



The ground beneath Cary had turned to magma and dragged him under. His eyes had filled with tears. He'd dropped the piece of shale, which now seemed to be mocking him for having ever shown interest in something so dull. Kerry hadn't started talking to him yet, so there was no one to tell him *it's not YOUR fault, Daddy's just being MEAN* (she said something along those lines years later, when the subject came up, but by then he'd internalized it too deeply). There was no one to help him process it. He'd just curled up tightly under the table, crying silently, burningly aware of his grandmother arguing with her son behind him. It was one of those quiet grownup exchanges they assumed he wasn't listening to, or if he was, that he didn't understand. "Ray, he's four years old," Kungsi had scolded, and he'd replied, "and I don't think he should be raised under fraudulent pretenses." Cary knew a lot of words for his age, but even if he hadn't, the meaning was still clear: Daddy didn't *want* to be his Daddy.

And that was when he had his first asthma attack. Cary sometimes wondered if this was the moment Kerry started to exist. It would be another couple of years before she started talking to him, and even longer before she physically manifested, but maybe *this* was when she split off, some kind of trauma-induced secondary personality, everything he wished he could be. Kerry wasn't fond of this theory, partly because she was sure she always *had* been there, mostly because it implied she was a disorder instead of the best thing that had ever happened to him. But *if* any outside catalyst might have *caused* Kerry, that would have been it.

But nearly half a century had passed. Surely the trauma was all behind him. The old man generously chopping vegetables at the counter seemed friendly enough, but watching him, Cary felt small, sick, confused. It *did* hurt. Still.

It wasn't anger, though. He never could get angry. Kerry got angry enough for both of them.

"Mama said we should talk to you now," she said flatly, as they stood in the doorway.

"Mama is a wise, perceptive woman. Come. Have a seat." He scraped the vegetables into a bowl and gestured toward the table, where he sat down. Cary and Kerry exchanged a look, and slowly, nervously (at least in Cary's case), joined him there.

## *The Principles of Bygones*

“This is all on me. I’ll own it. I know you have no reason to want anything to do with me. I did you wrong, and I’m sorry.”

“Yes,” Cary said, carefully. It seemed an awfully aggressive thing to respond, but it was all he could manage. Kerry just scowled silently, arms folded tight.

“It took me far too long to understand that this was something that should have stayed between your mother and me, and I was taking it out on you. Now, I forgave your mother long ago —”

“But she didn’t do —” Kerry started to insist, but Cary kicked her under the table, and Ray pressed on regardless.

“...but whether *you* can forgive *me* is a lot to ask. Maybe I don’t know who your father was, but I really should’ve been your Dad.”

“Got one part right, at least.” Kerry rolled her eyes.

“And to think my stupid pride made me miss this lovely young lady’s entire childhood. Are you in college, high school, now? Kerry, was it? Named after your dad?”

“Cary made me spend a decade in college, it was boring, I didn’t pay attention,” Kerry spat out, while Cary cleared his throat and said, “Um, I-I see Mama never got around to explaining about us, did she.”

There was a pause under the meaningful look they exchanged, and Ray looked from one to the other. “What. What am I missing?”

“Cary’s not my dad, you *are*.”

Ray frowned. “That doesn’t make a lick of sense.”

“You see, we —” Cary began, but Kerry stormed on.

“’Cause when we were born, all you saw was Cary when you expected to see me, so you freaked out and left, and there I was inside him the whole time, you just didn’t know.”

*Amy M. Weir*

“To be fair,” Cary pointed out, “*NO* one knew you were there for the next eight years.”

“Well to be fair*ER*, he knew *YOU* were there and he rejected you anyway, that’s not exactly better.”

Cary shrugged nervously. She was right. He was trying to be a grownup about this, for Mama’s sake, but it was kind of a relief to have Kerry voicing all that anger for him instead.

“Yes. I know. There is no amount of I’m-sorry I can say that will make it up to you. But I still don’t understand. How...? I was there, when Cary was born, you weren’t... you’re not *twins* or anything...”

“We *are*, sort of.” Cary explained. “We developed together somehow, co-mingled, not...not Siamese twins, technically, we each have our own unique genetic code. This is something...different. New. Kerry spends most of her time inside me instead of interacting fully with the world, so she ages at a different rate.”

“And frankly, I didn’t *want* to come out when you were around, full offense.”

Ray made a sort of choking noise, then nodded. “Understood. About the offense. But...I just don’t....”

He looked so incredulous that Cary couldn’t help feeling defensive. “I know, it’s, it’s unheard of, but why do you think I’ve devoted my life to researching mutation? Just because I, I can pass for white? When i-if anything that’s made life e-easier for me? No, it’s always been about *her*. My sister, and, and I. Us. Whatever we are.” The older they got, the weirder it seemed to call her “sister.” He *had* been more of a dad to her than Ray Whitecloud ever was.

“Whatever we *are* is awesome, that’s what. And we can do this.” Kerry took up her usual position and announced —in Cary’s head, at least — *See? I was here just like this the whole time.*

“He, um, can’t hear you.” Cary wondered at her forgetting that.

*I know, you’re supposed to say it for me.*

“She says to tell you she was here just like this the whole time.”



## *The Principles of Bygones*

A sort of dawning came over their father's face. "Wait. Now I do remember something. When you were little, you used to talk to yourself like that. Your mama was worried I'd somehow broke your mind, made you obsessed with the girl I'd thought you should have —I mean, that we'd been expecting. But she...she really was there?"

"Would you have stayed if you'd known?"

Cary and Kerry said that simultaneously, she taking the lead, he before he could stop himself. The thought had been there. She'd just given it a nudge on her way out.

The question hung between them like lead. After a long, heavy pause, Ray leaned in.

"Trick question. There's no right answer, is there? And I honestly don't know. If I'd *known the girl* I was expecting, was there *inside* that little wasichu boy... would I? Or would I still have assumed the worst? Possibly. Probably. I was a prideful idiot."

He sat back again, thinking. Finally he said, "Now, I don't know if you'll appreciate this, you're a man of science and all, but we have a long history of shaman in our family. Medicine men. *Magic* men. I remember my grandparents once told me some of our ancestors were known to exhibit a unique skill, even among shaman, of being two places at the same time. So I wonder now —"

Cary's mouth twitched. "You're suggesting our condition is... hereditary?"

"Yes. Yes, I guess I am." Ray smiled in a slightly embarrassed way, which took Kerry aback slightly. She'd often seen Cary make that exact same face.

"On your side of the family." Cary grinned, though his eyes were welling up. "Two minutes ago you called me wasichu."

"I still don't know where that yellow hair came from, but you definitely have my nose."

"Oh my god." Kerry buried her head in her arms.

*Amy M. Weir*

“Kerry doesn’t always deal well with irony.”

“Fifty-two years! And you just noticed his nose?!”

“I can’t make up the half-century we lost, but I want to make the best of this last month or so we have with your mama.” He frowned toward the door. “Who should really be resting now.”

Mama leaned on the doorframe, watching somewhat smugly. “Are we finally all on the same page?”

“I...think?” Ray held a hand out toward Cary, as if awaiting his response.

“We are...moving in the right direction, at least.” Cary shook his father’s hand.

“Enough to call a truce, I guess.” Kerry kept her arms crossed.

Ray shrugged. “Well, I suppose I can’t be a real Dad without being scorned by my teenaged daughter at least once.” He watched her carefully. She watched him steadily back. Finally she cracked something of a grimace and graced him with a fist bump.

“So now that we’re all a big happy family again,” she said to Mama, “what, you want us to go to Disneyland together?”

“That might be fun.” Mama laughed. “But no. Maybe I’ll settle for going out for ice cream.”

“Gross.”

“Someplace with an arcade to keep Kerry busy,” she added.

“You don’t like ice cream?” Ray looked confused again.

“Better to avoid discussing food with her at all,” Cary muttered to him.

“So you don’t want to try my famous ratatouille, then?”

“...I’ll sit at the table, I guess.”

## *The Principles of Bygones*

“That’s a tremendous compliment, you know, Ray,” said Mama.

And so the Whitecloud-Loudermilks sat down to their very first family dinner.

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“...So your mama tells me you run some kind of ... mutant cult?”

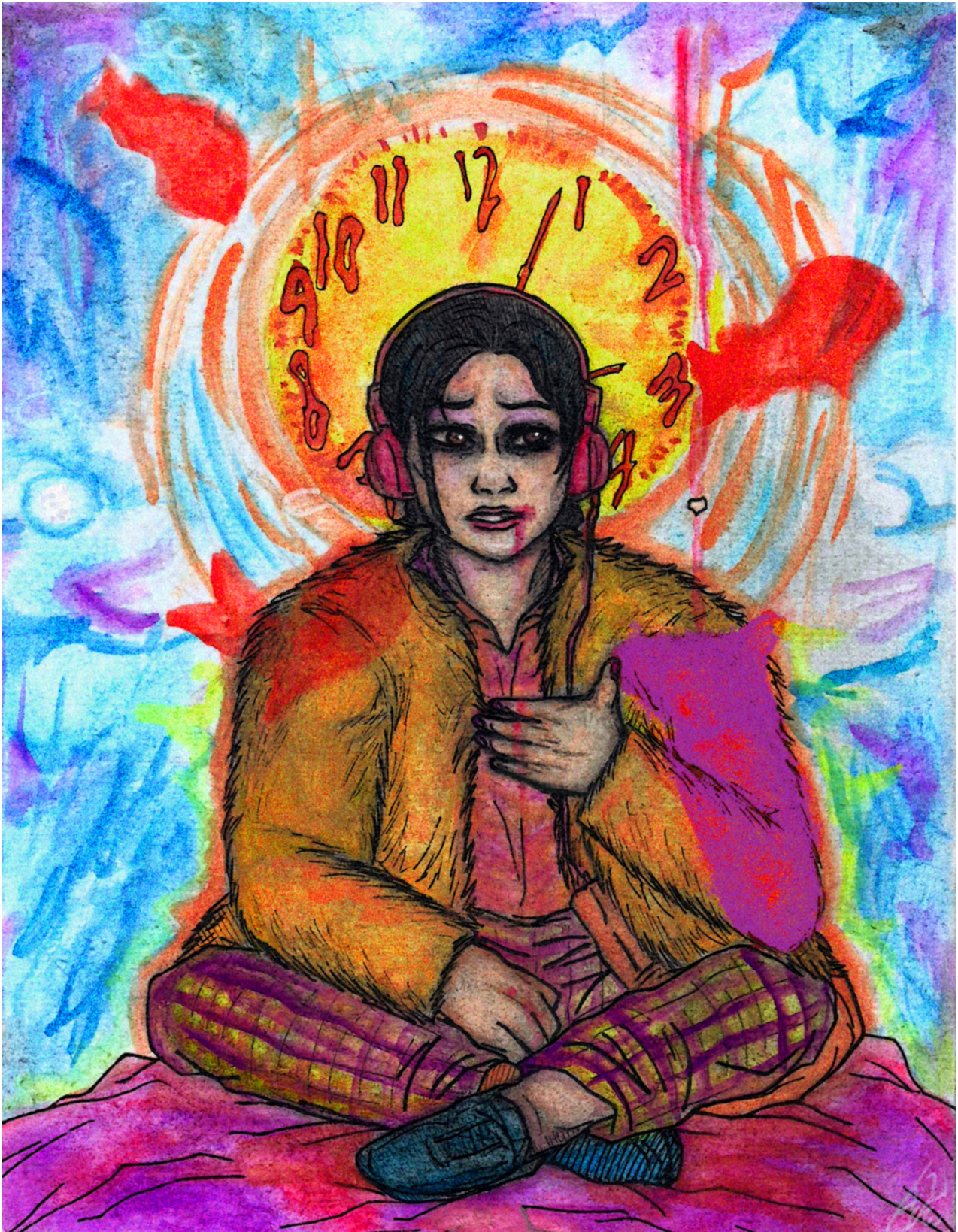
“Not a cult! A safe haven. And I don’t run it alone, I just run the scientific parts.”

“I run the fighting parts.”

“I have known you all of half an hour and that already doesn’t surprise me.”



*Switch - A. Kaake (Noteblue13)*













*Legion - 177.T.R.*







*Acknowledgements: Thank you to thecarelessvoice and versaphile for being my beta readers and sensitivity readers for this fic!*

David sits on a tree root and looks up at the house they're staying in.

It's not like any other house he's ever lived in. There are no planks, no floorboards, no rebar or concrete. Instead, the roots and branches of the surrounding forest have grown together to weave four wooden walls. In a concession to civilization, a big slab of rock serves as a floor, and a few glass windows peek out of the intertwined branches.

It's not a big house, but it's *his*, in a way none of the houses or apartments or hospitals he's lived in before ever were. He *made* it, reaching his powers into the veins and leaves of the trees to shape them to his will.

It feels... right.

Something falls out of the sky and brushes past David's cheek to land on his shirt. He looks down in surprise, and sees a snowflake.

More snowflakes start to come down, and now they're swirling around his feet, and it's snowing properly. David realizes how cold it is, and that he's dressed in nothing but a t-shirt and jeans. He only has a few sets of clothes here - he left his old clothes behind at Division Three, and he has no desire to go back to the commune for his guru outfit.

When did it become winter?

## *Light One Candle*

He climbs up the dirt — and — stone stairs to the doorway of their little house and brushes past the worn quilt that serves as their door.

The inside is bright and warm. David could've lit it with his powers — he's done it before — but Syd insisted on a generator. She's still afraid, he thinks, that he and Farouk are going to vanish one day, and she's going to have to fend for herself. She let him build the house, but she doesn't want to need his help to live in it.

Right now, she's sitting on the couch — Farouk procured that, he didn't ask how — and sketching. David glances at her drawing pad; it shows a half — finished sketch of the house from the outside.

"It's snowing," he says. "Is it winter? When did it start being winter?"

They've been living here, cut off from the outside world, leaving only occasionally in their attempts to be better people. It's going well, David thinks. But then again, these days he's not sure he's qualified to tell good from bad. But they've all lost track of time.

Syd looks up, blinking. "Hasn't it been winter for awhile now? What day is it?"

"December 17th, the 26th of Azar, the 24th of Kislev," says Farouk's voice, and they look up to see him exiting his room and shrugging on a long black winter coat. "I can't say I enjoy the climate here."

David blinks. "24th of Kislev? Wow, it's — almost Hanukkah," he says. He thinks back to winters with his family, back when he was a kid, before everything went wrong. Playing dreidel with Amy, eating chocolate coins, lighting the candles...

"It's almost Christmas, too," Syd says, thoughtfully.

"We should do something," David says, impulsively. "For the holidays. I can — I can teleport us into town and I can buy a menorah and you can buy a tree."

"The 21st is Shab — e Yalda," Farouk says. "The darkest night of the year, when the powers of darkness are afoot..." He smiles, slightly. "A good night for me, I suppose."

## Hexiva

“Let’s go, all of us,” David says. “We’ve — all of us have been so busy, trying to — ” He swallows. “To make up for everything. We’ve got to have something to celebrate. Don’t we?”

“It could be good for us,” Syd says, slowly. “I haven’t celebrated Christmas in a long time. Not since Clockworks.”

“What is the point of striving for redemption if we have nothing to look forward to at the end?” Farouk says.

“Then it’s settled,” David says, nodding. “This December is gonna be for us.”

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They teleport behind a dumpster, in an alley next to the big department store in town, and David leads the way out into the snowy parking lot. He blinks, looking around at the cars, the stores, the people laughing and arguing and getting in and out of their cars. It feels so strange to be standing here, in a regular street on a regular day among regular people. Like the three of them are just — people, not monsters.

He hesitates, takes a step back. Maybe they don’t belong here.

Syd steps past him, looking up into the night sky, with the snow swirling down, and then across the parking lot to where the Christmas trees stand. Her eyes go distant. She leads the way across the parking lot, with Farouk following her. David hesitates, and then he follows too, a few feet behind the two of them.

They file into the lot. The attendant gives them a curious look. Farouk is clad in an elegant, double — breasted black wool coat that goes down to his mid — calf over slacks, with a silk cravat and dark brown leather driving gloves. Syd is wearing a short orange coat over black leggings and black suede boots, with long, buckled black gloves, a dark grey scarf wrapped around her neck, and a black beanie covering her hair. And David, next to them, is in a worn — out Pink Floyd t — shirt and jeans with holes in the knees. He wonders what the three of them must look like, together.

“So, uh, how do we choose?” David asks. “I can always... you know, make the roof taller or... smaller or...”



## *Light One Candle*

“No brown branches. No... falling over and losing all its needles. No bulges in weird places,” Syd says. That distant look came into her eyes again. “My mom would always go through, look at all of the trees. One by one. Take off the netting, see how they shook out... if the branches were symmetrical, if the trunk was straight. It had to be small enough to fit into our apartment, but not too small... Have to impress the guests. She could be at it for hours. It used to drive her men, whichever one she had this year, it used to drive them crazy that she couldn’t make a decision. I used to just sit in the corner until she was done...”

“So... do you want to... do that?” David says, very uncertainly.

“No,” Syd says, slowly, and then again, “No. No, let’s...” She turned away from the trees and faced David. “Shut your eyes.”

“What?” David says, nervously.

“Shut your eyes,” she orders.

David blinks, and then does as he’s told. He holds very still as he feels Syd’s gloved hands on his bare, chilled arm, pulling it up, guiding his fingers to point off into the distance.

“Now spin,” Syd’s voice says.

“Spin?” David asks. He hears Farouk chuckle.

“Spin around in a circle. Go.” Syd pushes him slightly.

David spins around, and around, and around again, until his head is spinning and Farouk and Syd are laughing, and Syd’s hands stop him. “There.”

David opens his eyes. His hand is pointing at a mid – sized white fir, just to the left of the lot entrance.

Farouk reaches out and brushes his finger over the needles of the tree, and plucks one in two fingers. “More than a few brown needles,” he observes.

“I don’t care,” Syd says. “That’s our tree.”

“As you say,” Farouk says, with a mock bow.

David lugs the tree back to the attendant, who wraps it up and equips it with a stand. “We’ll pick it up later,” Syd says, authoritatively. “We have some more shopping to do.”

Farouk leads the way into the store. David looks around him again, at the chintzy decorations, at the busy shoppers. He always liked Christmas, as a child. His family never celebrated, of course, but in a way, that made it better — he’d only ever seen the holiday through the lens of idyllic movie marathons on TV, unmarred by the actual experiences of mothers debating over trees and family members clashing over dinner. But right now, it all feels — alien. Like the whole business of holidays — Jewish or Christian or Persian — belongs to another world from his, now.

Farouk ignores the “Holiday” section prominently displayed at the front of the store — and, David can’t help but notice, decorated in suspiciously sectarian colors — and leads them to the produce section. David watches the Shadow King pick up a watermelon in his hands and weigh it, and then knock on the rind and listen intently to the sound.

“I kind of figured you had cooks to do all of that for you,” David says.

“Mmm... if I wanted to do that, I could simply materialize the fruit, I suppose,” Farouk says. “But what would be the point in that?” He picks up another watermelon, checks it, and shakes his head despairingly. “These are terrible. Not worth the effort.”

“It’s December,” Syd points out.

Farouk shakes his head, as if to say that the inexorable march of the seasons is no excuse for mildly inconveniencing the King of Shadows. He takes the watermelon, and goes to investigate a pile of pomegranates.

“Why pomegranates?” David asks.

“It’s traditional,” Farouk explains, examining a pomegranate. “They say the color of the fruit is like the color of the sky at dawn. Red is the color of Yalda.” His lips curl in an ironic smirk. “Dawn is supposed to symbolize the triumph of light over darkness, truth over lies, good over evil.”

## *Light One Candle*

David and Syd look at each other. “Doesn’t sound like your kind of holiday,” David points out.

Farouk laughs. “Perhaps. But I like pomegranates. And wine — yes, there should be wine.”

He selects a few more fruits and other snacks. David grabs potatoes and onions — he’s not sure exactly how he plans to convert them to latkes, given that he’s not much of a cook, but he’s sure they’ll find a way. They move on, deeper into the store, and he finds an aisle with some Hanukkah candles and assorted other festive stuff, and stops there. He grabs some candles — more than necessary, just in case — and, on a whim, a few bags of chocolate coins and a dreidel. None of them are children — but it’s what he remembers. There are a few menorahs on sale, more than he expected, and he pauses to consider.

There’s an LED one, but that seems wrong to him. He wants to see the candle flames dance. He moves on to a chintzy silver — colored menorah with a hexagonal base, and picks it up to examine the engravings on it. His parents had had an old one, worn brass, with vines engraved on each branch. He can still remember the weight of it, the smell of metal on his hands. This one isn’t right. He sets it down and picks up another one. This one is simpler, shiny brass branches curving up from a Star of David at the base. He shakes his head. The metal is too shiny, too new. There’s no wax on the branches or dripping down onto the base. He remembers the way the colors mixed on his parents’, years of wax melting together to make strange patterns.

Amy probably had that menorah, when she died. Where is it now? he wonders. He supposes he should have inherited Amy’s belongings. There was never any time for that, for a funeral or inheritance or real mourning. He had been too busy looking for revenge, and where had that got him?

He looks up, his eyes finding Syd. Their gazes meet, and just that is a little bit of comfort. He hasn’t ruined everything yet. He’s not alone.

“We can go somewhere else, if they don’t have what you want,” Syd says.

“Yeah,” David says, without conviction. The selection here isn’t great, but he’s not sure another store would be any different. He wants — something else. Something of his own. “Let’s go,” he says, putting the gelt and candles into their basket. “It’s getting late.”

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## Hexiva

It's December 18th, and the three of them are eating latkes.

Admittedly, they're a little crispier than they ought to be. About half of them have burned bits, and more than a few are so charcoalized that not even David is willing to eat them. He expected a snide comment from at least one of them, but so far, their mouths have been too full to make any sort of comments. It's been awhile since any of them had hot, home – cooked food.

"It's getting kind of late," Syd says, swallowing a mouthful of potato. "Hanukkah starts in the evening, right? Didn't you say you were going to get a menorah?"

David looks up at her and grins. "Yeah," he says. "I've got a plan for that. I'm gonna be ready. Are you going to eat that?" He points at the last potato pancake on her plate.

"Not sure I have the space," Syd says, wiping her mouth fastidiously with a blue and white patterned napkin David bought at the store.

David snags it with greasy fingers and moves it to his plate, digging in with an eagerness that belies the dozen or so latkes he's already eaten.

"They taste different," Farouk says, thoughtfully, inspecting his last latke, "Than they did when I was you. Is it your cooking, I wonder, or my tongue?" He picks the pancake up on his fork, investigating it. "Same recipe, I think." He shrugs, and eats it.

Together they gather up the dishes and clear the table. David grins to himself. "Come on," he says. "I'm gonna show you."

Syd and Farouk exchange a curious glance, and follow him out into the snowy forest, shrugging on winter coats. David lets his excitement warm the air around him instead. He's more comfortable with his powers now than ever before, and it's a relief, in a way, feeling like he's in control of himself and his powers for the first time.

"So what is this that you have to show us?" Farouk asks, lifting his eyebrows.

## *Light One Candle*

“This,” David says, and lifts his hands into the air, palms up. He feels the power spread out of him, reaching through the earth into the roots, up through the veins of the trees into their branches and leaves, taking control. The branches reach out for each other, closing the small distance between one another, and grow together, each twig twining around another. They shape themselves into a base and nine branches, slowly taking on the shape of a menorah. David grins, his eyes glowing with power, and the tips of the menorah begin to glow too. With a shake of his head, the glow vanishes, and where it had been, the wooden branches become metal. He lifts his hands like an orchestra conductor, and then lets them fall, and the menorah separates itself from the trees and falls to the ground at David’s feet.

David turns around, grinning proudly, and looks back at Syd and Farouk for approval.

“Not bad,” Syd says, raising an eyebrow, and David knows she’s impressed but too proud to say it.

Farouk smiles at him. “Beautiful,” he says.

David smiles back at the two of them, for a moment lost in the experience of not being alone.

Farouk walks past him to the menorah, and bends down to pick it up. He holds it up to the light, admiring the craftsmanship. “Impressive,” he says. “And fitting, in a way, for the house it will be in.”

“It’s mine,” David says, firmly, although he doesn’t move to take it from Farouk. “That’s what we need. The ones at the store weren’t right.”

He leads the way back inside, and Farouk settles the menorah on the kitchen counter. David fishes in the drawers — which are somewhat irregularly shaped because, like the rest of the house, he grew them himself — and pulls out the pack of cheap blue and white candles from the store, along with a lighter. He inserts the candles into the branches of the menorah, and sets it back down, pleased with how they fit.

He looks around at Syd and Farouk, and then shuts his eyes, reaching back in memory to his last Hanukkah with his family, with Amy, with his father. He clears his throat, and starts reciting the prayer: “*Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech ha’olam asher ... kideshanu* — ” His voice stumbles over the words, it’s been so

## Hexiva

long, he's forgotten (just like he forgets everything, sick, he's sick) -

And then Farouk's voice picks up the words from him, barely missing a beat. "Bemitzvotav vetzivanu lehadlik ner Chanukah."

David looks over at him, startled, and Farouk smiles. "I was there too," he says, quietly.

David swallows, feeling warm inside, and he finds the words for the second prayer. "*Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech Haolam sheasa —* " And he hesitates again, but this time he finds the words — "*Nissim laavotenu bayamim hahem bizman hazeh.*"

Farouk takes over for the last prayer, and David speaks along with him, reciting the Hebrew words together. "*Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech Haolam shehecheyanu vekiyimanu vehigianu lizman hazeh.*"

His hand shaking with emotion, David reaches out and lights the *shamash*, the candle on the tallest center branch. Then he takes the lit candle in his hand, and uses it to light the first candle, before setting it back on its branch.

His hand drops to the counter beside the menorah, and Syd's gloved hand comes to rest next to it, a few scant inches away. Farouk reaches out to put a hand on David's shoulder, and they watch the candles burn together.

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The fifth day of Hanukkah is the winter solstice — the night of Yalda, according to Farouk. David watches the sun set outside their woodland home, and it's... peaceful. It's been a long time since anything was peaceful.

He turns around as Syd and Amahl walk into the kitchen with him. "Time for the candles?" he asks them.

"*Oui*," Farouk says. David reaches for the lighter, and Farouk stops him. "Come with me," the older man says. "Bring the menorah and the candles."

David blinks, but he picks up the menorah and pockets the box of candles. He and Syd follow Farouk into his bedroom.

## Light One Candle

David hasn't spent a lot of time in Farouk's room, but he knows it doesn't usually look like this. The bed has vanished, replaced by a low, round table covered with a red and gold blanket. The table is filled with little dishes, nuts, candy, fruit, with an empty brass tray sitting in the very center, and there's a book with Arabic characters on the cover sitting on the edge of the table. The whole tableau is surrounded by soft velvet cushions, piled up around the edges to create a sort of nest. David blinks at it. "When did all this get here?" he asks.

"When I willed it," Farouk says, as if that should be answer enough. "Put the menorah on the *korsi*, the table. I left space." He indicates the brass tray, and David sets it down.

"Is this all traditional?" Syd asks. "For Yalda?"

"More or less," Farouk says. "Not the menorah so much." He sat down amid the cushions, leaning against the wall with his legs under the table. "Sit with me, my friends."

Syd slips under the table, pulling the blanket up over herself, and David follows suit, making sure to leave enough space on either side that he's not at risk of accidentally touching Syd — or Farouk, for that matter. He's surprised to find it warmer under the table than outside; there's a heater concealed under the blankets. He can't help but smile; the total effect is very cozy. Even Farouk looks relaxed, his sunglasses gone, enjoying the warmth without — as far as David can tell — any edge of supercilious smugness.

"So," Syd says. "What do we do for this holiday?"

"Candles first, I think," Farouk says, nodding to David.

David closes his eyes, soaking in the warmth and their company, and recites the prayer — from memory this time, without needing help. He settles the candles in place and carefully lights the *shamash*, and then five of the other candles. The light from the candles casts the room into soft golden shadows.

Farouk takes a handful of nuts from one of the dishes, which David takes as his cue to dive in. He's a little suspicious of some of the pastries — they look good, but on the other hand, they did come from Farouk, which makes them inherently suspect. But he recognizes the fruits and nuts, and helps himself to some pomegranate seeds to munch on. He's always liked pomegranates, but he never has the energy to cut open the fruit and pick the seeds out, one by one, laboriously, so



## Hexiva

he rarely has them. But these ones are conveniently pre – plucked, and delicious.

Syd is munching on a baklava, and David eyes it hungrily. Farouk looks at him and smiles. He reaches out to take one, and takes a bite of it himself. “Don’t worry, *joonam*. No poison.”

David gives in. Syd’s eating it, and Farouk is too, so it must be fine. He snags a baklava and bites in with a sigh of satisfaction. Honey and nuts and pastry. Can’t go wrong with that.

Farouk swallows his baklava, and says, “Yalda Night is a time for food and warmth and, most importantly, poetry.” He wipes the honey off his fingers, fastidiously, and picks up the book. “This is Hafez. Do you know him?”

David shakes his head, but Syd shrugs. “I know of him,” she says. “My mom was really into Goethe... and Goethe was really into Hafez.”

“They say he is the greatest Persian poet,” Farouk says, neutrally. “I prefer Khayyam, myself... but it is traditional, on this night.” He pages through the book, and his eyes go distant and soft. David watches his face intently. It’s strange to see Farouk lost in thought, not looking back at him, unaware of his gaze.

“I celebrated this holiday, from time to time, with my followers, my thralls, my latest – what’s the word? – fling,” Farouk says. “It was a *divertissement*, a distraction, a game.” He pages through the book, idly. “This is not like that.”

“How do we know?” Syd says, before David can say anything. “How do we know you’re not just playing us, too?”

It’s something David’s been wondering, this entire time. This truce they’ve got – is it really peace? Or just another one of Farouk’s tricks, like the false Clockworks?

Farouk studies first Syd’s face, and then David’s. “You don’t,” he admits. “That is the difficulty with such power, is it not? We – ” And here he nods to David – “Know the strength of illusions. I used to wonder if it all was an illusion, a dream of my own. Nothing seemed real.” He looks at David, his eyes sharp, and David shivers under the intensity of the gaze. “And then you happened.” Farouk looks away, into the flickering flames of the menorah. “I want this to be real. I want to believe I am in earnest. Is that enough?”

## Light One Candle

“I don’t need words,” Syd says. “I need action.”

“Then this is my action,” Farouk says. “Let me prove, by inaction, that I will not harm you. Either of you. Let me be here as I have been, day after day, with the two of you.”

“Is that enough?” Syd asks, holding his gaze.

Farouk meets her gaze. “I have to hope that it will be.”

The room is silent for a few moments, and David can feel the tension buzzing in the air. He waits a moment to see if it dissipates on its own, and when it doesn’t, he leans across the table to grab three baklava and shoves two in his mouth at once. He might as well make the most of the food if they’re gonna be fighting anyway.

Syd’s eyes stray to him, and then she starts laughing. “You look like a chipmunk,” she says.

David starts to laugh too, and then almost chokes on baklava, and has to force it down his throat before he can laugh, and by that time, Farouk is laughing too.

“You and your sweet tooth,” Farouk says at last, shaking his head. He picks up a baklava and lifts it in David’s direction, as if in a toast. “To your health!”

Syd grabs a baklava and nudges it against Farouk’s, like they’re clinking wine glasses. “To David’s health,” she says, her lips curling in a little, suppressed smile. She takes a bite, swallows, and then says, “So. About that poetry...”

“Yes, of course,” Farouk says. He picks up the book again, and pages through it. “*Khosha Shiraz – o vaz – e bi mesalash*,” he reads out, “*Khodavanda negah dar az zəvaləsh / Ze Rokn Abad – e ma sad lohash allah / Ke Omr – e Khezr mibakhshad zolaləsh*.”

David listens to the poetry. He doesn’t understand the words, but the rhythm shows through the language barrier, and Farouk’s voice is both powerful and soothing. *Hypnotic*, Oliver said. David’s eyes slip shut, and for a moment, he sees a city of low buildings and pine trees, and through it, a river that runs sometimes dry and sometimes full and shining -

“What does that mean?” Syd asks, and David opens his eyes.

“How beautiful is Shiraz's unparalleled state / God save it from harm and the hands of fate / May God keep its flowing Roknabad river / Its waters with freshness, always equate,” Farouk says, softly.

“That's the city,” David says, surprised. “And the river... are those your memories?”

Farouk quirks his eyebrows at him. “Reading my mind, my dear?” He doesn't seem offended. “Yes. I travelled there once, just before the war with Russia. I was a young man, then... twenty – five, and ready to see the world. It's a glorious city; even a heretic like myself was impressed with the beauty of the Nasir al – Mulk Mosque.”

“Mosque?” Syd says, frowning. “You told me you were two thousand years old. Over two thousand years old. What mosques were around when you were twenty – five?”

David's eyebrows went up. “Two *thousand* years?” He tried to make the number fit in his head. He found he could make it fit with the shapeless monster who had tormented him his whole life, or with the philosophical, regretful man who sat across the table from him – but not *both*.

“Did I say that?” Farouk says, vaguely. He takes a handful of almonds and pops one into his mouth. “Ahh, we all have our stories we tell about ourselves, don't we?”

Syd reaches out, snags the container of almonds, and slides it over to her side of the table, out of Farouk's reach. “You're supposed to be working on being a better person. Just like us. That means you owe us *honesty*.”

“Do I?” Farouk asks, but Syd holds his gaze.

“How are we supposed to trust you, if you know everything about us and we don't know anything about you?” she asks.

Farouk studies Syd's eyes, and for a moment, David holds his breath, not sure what he's afraid is going to happen. And then Farouk blinks.

## Light One Candle

“I was born some time in 1803... or perhaps it was 1804,” he says. “A long time ago, now... My father went to war when I was young, like the fool he was, and our fortunes took a turn for the worse. I survived.” He shuts his eyes. “This poem, about Shiraz, I remember my mother read it to me the year after the war, that Yalda Night. I imagined what Shiraz must be like, such a distant city, to the far south... it was just us, then. My father was gone, and I was their only child. An accident of fate.”

David tries to imagine that, tries to imagine Farouk as a kid. It’s hard to imagine him any other way than how he is, somehow. As if he’s some immutable fact of reality. “What were you like, as a kid?” David asks.

Farouk tilts his head, and considers it. “I was not yet myself,” he says, eventually. “I was *khashmgin*, filled with anger... I was powerless, the world beyond my control, and I hated it for that.” He opens his eyes, his eyes thoughtful. “And, perhaps, I was afraid of it. I was a helpless child in a world torn apart by forces beyond my control.”

Syd snorts. “And you couldn’t stand that, could you. Not being in control.”

“No,” Farouk agrees, quietly, “I couldn’t. I was weak.”

David looks up at Farouk. He sees the way the candlelight is reflected in Farouk’s eyes, turning them a warm, pale brown that’s somehow familiar, even though he never saw Farouk’s face before Division Three. “What happened to ‘nothing matters but power’?” he asks, cocking his head in a challenge.

“You happened,” Farouk says, softly. He reaches out, and touches the base of the menorah. “I lived your life, and it changed me. And now... I don’t wish to go back to my old life. Who did I have there? No one who was not disposable, was not fungible. You fear I am lying to you... I’ve given you reason, but the truth is that I would not dare. I have too much to lose now.”

Despite himself, David finds he believes Farouk. He shuts his eyes, and reaches out to brush Farouk’s mind with his own. For a moment, the three of them rest together, watching the candles flicker and enjoying the silence.

“Read another,” David says, and Farouk obeys.



Christmas morning dawns, bright and early, and finds David in his bedroom, putting the finishing touches on his Christmas presents. Farouk's is a bit of an odd shape, the present slightly deforming the cardboard box it's in, but David shrugs and just tapes a bow on the top. He picks up Syd's present, and levitates Farouk's along behind him as he walks out into the common area.

The Christmas tree is in the center of the room, lit up with lights and decorations. ("Are you sure the lights are supposed to be orange?" David had asked, and Syd had folded her arms and said, "I like orange," and that had been that.) There are four presents already under the tree, two of them addressed to David, and he adds his two to the pile.

Syd is perched on the couch — an old striped thing that David found on a street corner somewhere — and drawing. David peers over her shoulder, and sees she's sketching the Christmas tree, idly.

"Morning," he says to her, grinning. "Where's Farouk?"

"In the kitchen," Syd answers, just as Farouk emerges, a mug in hand. It's an old thrifted mug with the words *I'm gonna need more coffee* emblazoned on it, along with a picture of a sleepy cat. David bought it himself, but the image of Farouk, clad in his expensive shirtsleeves and slacks, holding the mug makes him grin to himself.

"*Bonjour, mes amis*," Farouk says, smiling. He raises his cup in a mock toast to the two of them. "Oh, and *Eid Milad majid*." *Merry Christmas*, David hears, his mind automatically translating the Arabic through his telepathy.

"Merry Christmas to you too," Syd says. She sets her drawing pad down, and crosses her arms. "Are we gonna do this? I got you two something."

Farouk lifts his mug again. "Let us begin."

David slides down to sit on the floor next to the tree, cross — legged. Syd joins him on the opposite side, and Farouk sits between them.

"Open mine first," David says to Farouk, his lips quivering with suppressed mirth.

## *Light One Candle*

Farouk takes the box, raising an eyebrow at David's expression, and unwraps it carefully, sliding a fingernail under the tape to pull it off without damaging the paper. Inside is a plain cardboard box, slightly domed in the center as if stretched by something inside. Farouk pulls open the top to reveal -

A watermelon.

David snickers. "Since you were whining about the watermelons at the store, I thought I'd get you one." He grins. "I teleported all the way to Australia to get a ripe one."

Farouk blinks and raises an eyebrow at him, slowly. Syd snickers at his expression, and then starts laughing outright, leaning back against the wall to laugh helplessly. At first Farouk looks offended, but then his lips twist, unwillingly, with mirth, and then he's laughing too.

"You better not have gotten me a watermelon," Syd says.

"Watermelons for everyone," David says, grinning.

Farouk reaches for the second present with his name on it, from Syd, and pulls off the wrapping to reveal a framed portrait. Farouk holds it up to the light, and David sees Farouk's likeness, outlined in delicate pencil strokes.

Farouk studies it. "Your own work?" he says, softly.

"Yeah," Syd says, her eyes hard, practically daring him to criticize it, to say it's not good enough.

"Thank you," Farouk says, and, for once, there's no snide irony in his voice. "It's a good likeness." And he smiles. "And handsome, as well."

Syd rolls her eyes at him. "David, open yours."

David grabs a gift at random, and sees that it's from Farouk. While Syd and David both chose neutral, non — specific wrapping paper, Farouk has apparently chosen the most garish Christmas wrapping paper he could find. It consists of dancing Santas, trees, and presents, all on a bright green background. David doesn't know where he got it and he isn't going to ask.

## Hexiva

He rips the paper off, with a certain amount of satisfaction, and opens the box inside. His eyes widen slightly.

Inside the box is a tape emblazoned with the Pink Floyd logo, and an old, scratched – up Walkman, still plugged into a pair of headphones.

David pulls the Walkman out slowly, and turns it over. There is the place where he got red paint on it during a 4th grade art project, there is the crack where he dropped it down the stairs when he was 13, there's the scratch from when he tripped over Amy's bike when he was 17. This is *his*. He left it at his parent's house, all those years ago when he left for Clockworks, and he never thought he'd see it again.

His eyes fill with tears.

"Thanks," he says, his voice rough, and pockets the Walkman. He averts his eyes from Farouk, and gestures to Syd. "Open – open mine next."

Syd glances between the two of them, and picks up David's present to her, identifiable by the loud plaid wrapping. She unwraps it slowly and carefully, and pulls out a pair of gloves. She raises an eyebrow. "Thanks. You know I get like ten of these every Christmas, right?"

"I know, I know," David says, quickly. "But I thought you'd – you want to know that – that you don't have to... to touch anyone. That you can, that your gloves are fine. That you're – fine."

Syd looks first the gloves, and then David himself up and down with a raised eyebrow, and then gives a little nod, as if to say they've passed muster. She reaches out and grabs a rectangular present in blue wrapping paper, tossing it to David. "Here. Open this."

David catches it, and pulls away the plain wrapping to reveal a book. He blinks at the cover. *The Ring of Brightest Angels Around Heaven: A Novella and Stories*.

"This is..." he says.

"Yes," Syd says.

## *Light One Candle*

He opens the book, and pages through to the end. “None of us seemed to know the nature of the coincidences that bound us together, as I know now,” he read out loud, “or that junkies and masochists and hookers and those who have squandered everything are the ring of brightest angels around heaven.” He looks up at her, his eyes bright with tears. He remembers the words, all of the stories in the book, that he read over and over when he was in her mind. “Thank — thank you,” he says.

Syd looks away and crosses her arms. “Don’t read too much into it. I thought — I thought you’d like it.”

“I do,” David says. He wraps his arms around the book, and holds it close, as if it were her he was hugging. Farouk puts a hand on his shoulder, steadying him.

Syd reaches out and grabs Farouk’s present. It’s a small cube — shaped box, slightly too big to fit comfortably in one hand. Under the wrapping is a small note, written in elegant cursive and signed in Arabic letters. It reads, *To Sydney, in the hope that you will never have cause to use it.* Syd frowns.

“David was kind enough to help me make it,” Farouk says. “Handmade, of course.”

Syd opens the box and pulls out a small metal object that looks like a tuning fork, with a little loop on the base like a pendant. She frowns. “What is it?”

“The Choke,” Farouk says, softly. “In a version convenient to carry around.”

Syd turns it over in her hands, running her thumb over the polished metal. “Does it work?” she says, flatly.

“Yes,” Farouk says.

“You’re sure?” she asks.

“Yes,” Farouk says, with that implacable certainty he brings to everything.

“You can test it out, if you want,” David says, meeting her eyes.



## Hexiva

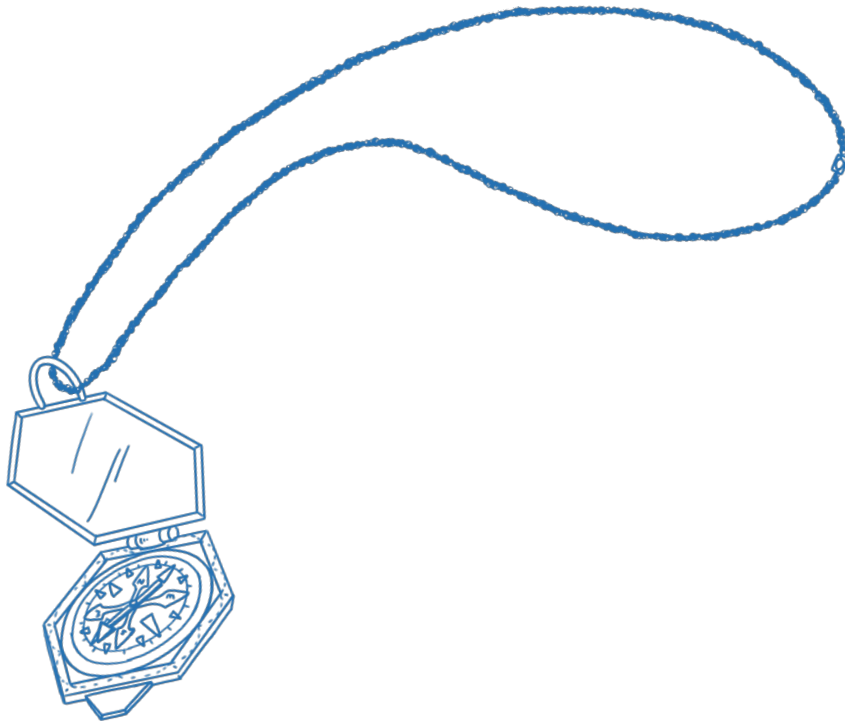
Syd reaches under the collar of her shirt, and pulls out the chain from which the compass hangs. Wordlessly, she clips the Choke onto the chain, next to the compass. She looks down at herself, the chain concealed under her shirt, and nods in satisfaction.

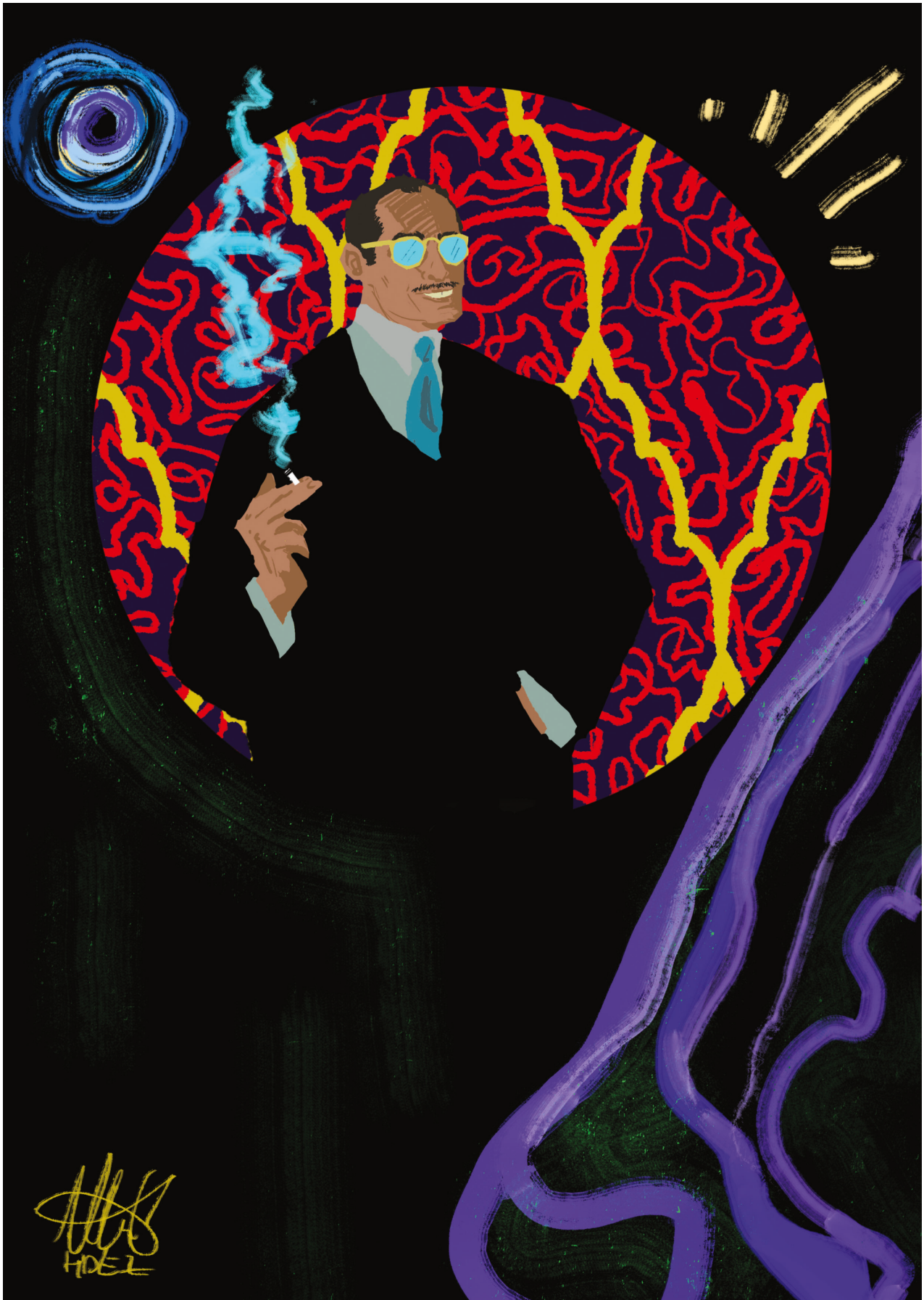
“Good?” David asks, hesitantly.

“Good,” Syd says, flatly.

“Merry Christmas, Syd,” he says.

“Merry Christmas, David,” Syd says, quietly, and her lips curve into a tiny smile.







*Lenny - Ezra Rendleman*

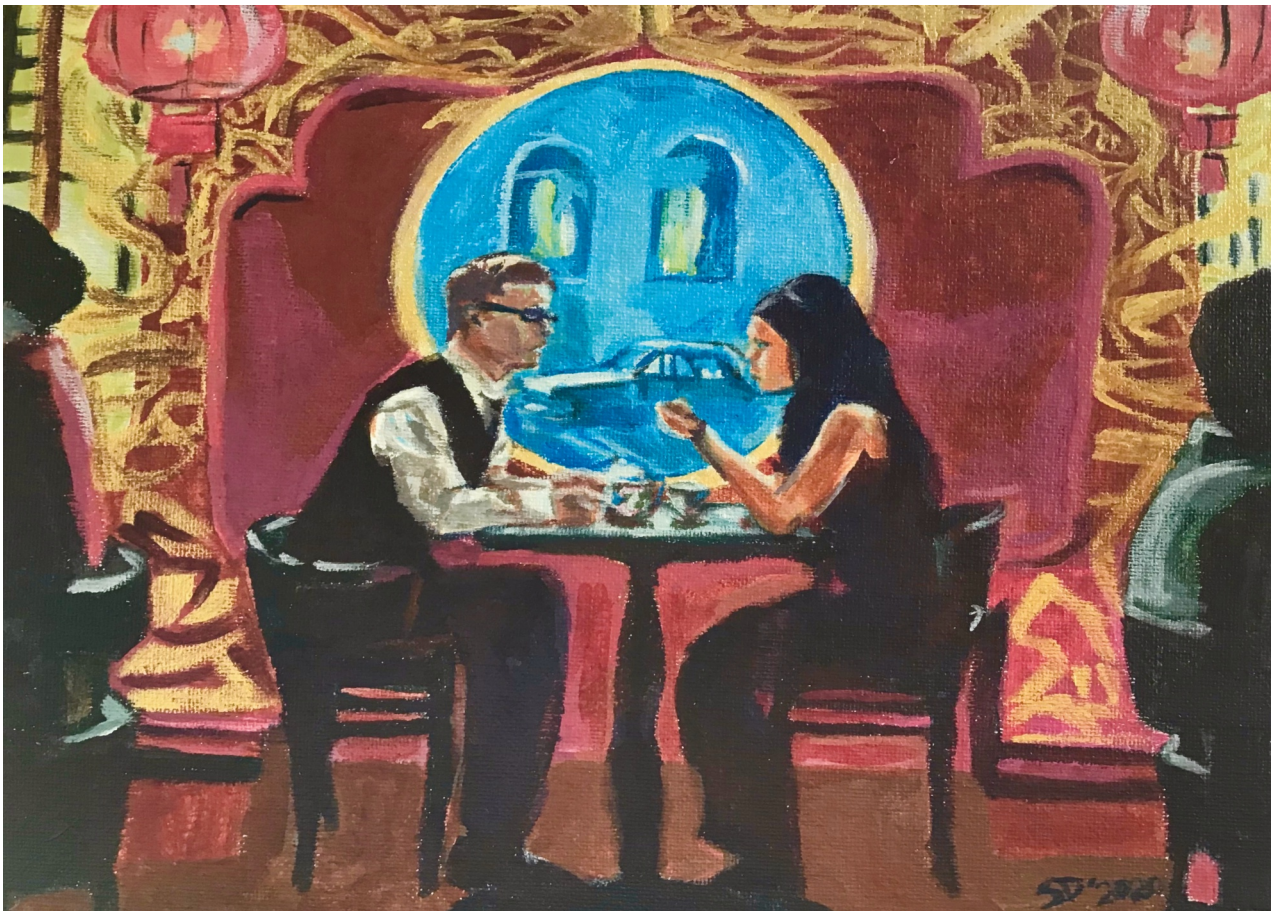


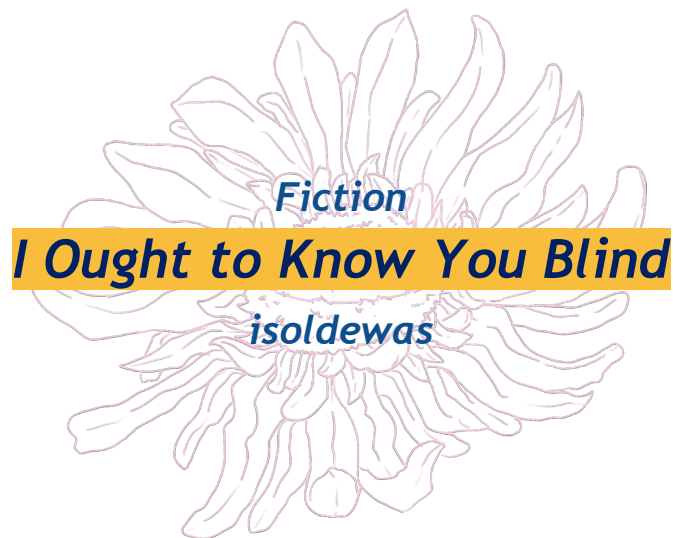


## Awakening - Ram









Kerry sees him crossing the street and drops her shopping bag. The carton of milk spills on the filthy pavement and the oranges roll under the passing car, and she can't make a fucking move.

---

"Cary's here?" There's no introducing the subject matter, so Kerry just throws it out there. Oliver raises an eyebrow.

She can't tell. She can't fucking tell if he is. Kerry remembers the hurt, her ribs crushing around empty space, her arms that wouldn't bend. And now she can't tell if he's on the other coast or not.

"He is," Oliver says.

"He's consulting," Melanie chimes in.

Cary's back in the city and no one said anything. It's Cary, she wants to go across the room and shake them. *It's Cary. It's me.*

Oliver looks back to the map in front of him, case closed.

So Kerry goes to say hello to Ben on security duty, camera feeds flicking behind him on the screens. There's a shape there, on the top left one, the one hooked up to the lab. The man keeps his back turned away from the camera, but Kerry knows the lines, the set of his shoulders hunched over a scary-looking contraption.

She can't tear her eyes away from the feed. In black and white, the image of him is terribly, unnervingly familiar. Kerry can predict the next move: he's going to reach for the pen on his right. Step closer. Turn his face to the camera and look up.

---

On Tuesdays, they always go to the same bar.

Sitting in an uncomfortable chair, not twenty minutes in, Kerry just wants to leave. She's still waiting on her fries.

Tuesdays are never easy. Crowds still make her wary. It shocks her into a state, how good they all are, how they aren't a threat. And then there's Cary, sitting on the other side of the table, who she just wants to punch and leave. Who she wants nothing to do with. Kerry keeps sipping at her cream soda.

On her right, Benjamin throws his head laughing and she mimics that as best she can. She doesn't want to look at Cary, but he won't stop raising his hands in exaggerated motions, always right *there*.

"You don't say!" he throws Melanie's way, eyes locking with Kerry's for a split second.

She turns to look at Oliver, at Ben and his stark green sweater, but Cary's hands clutch on to her peripheral vision. He's confident and incredibly loud. His voice is impossible for her not to hear: everything inside her has always been tuned to that exact frequency.

"Coffee," she hears, his voice a pitch screechy on the word, "Doesn't work on me." And that one kind of stings. That's something that's true for her too, and he's flaunting that in the open.

She splits her fries with Ben to finish up faster and gets up.

Near the counter, Melanie catches up with her. "We've got it, don't—" Her eyes are wide and intent on Kerry's mouth. "You know, when Oliver and I split up last year—" *Oh*. That's where this is going. Kerry cuts her off before she gets to the point.

"Mine wasn't a breakup, Melanie."

Kerry hopes her look is equally uncomfortable. Melanie shifts and withdraws, tapping Kerry on the shoulder before turning away.

## *I Ought to Know You Blind*

She walks out of there, looping her scarf around her neck when the door opens behind her, and Cary walks out too. He's taller than she is, that's the thing. His coat suits him. He feels like an entirely different person than the one from eight years ago.

He looks at her like he knows things. She doesn't think he's allowed to do that. Kerry wants to get closer, to press a finger to his chest, and see if it'll give.

She wants to leave him cold and alone and hurting. That place Kerry's trying to go back to, it doesn't exist. She knows that by now. Cary's all bone and blood if you cut him open. No magic to him, no remorse.

"You look cold," he mumbles, everything about him reserved now. Even his loud hands are tucked neatly in his pockets. With any luck, he'll pull a knife on her and this will be over.

"I'm always cold," she throws at him before getting away.

She comes back home and throws shoes against the wall. In the morning, there's a mission.

---

For a split second before the gunfire, everything in her is aware: the time is slowing down, like she is making it so, bending it to her will. The familiar tension in every muscle, the electricity in the air. See, now this has always seemed reasonable to her. In the early days she used to imagine Cary there with her: scared shitless and out of his element. All of that fear, Kerry used to think, he took with him when he left.

Someone grabs her arm from behind, a spoiled angle of attack. Don't they know by now, that she's the one to fear here? Kerry turns around, a knife in her hand, and there he is, not even a soldier. Not even anything in his beige suit, with his glasses and his mousy gray hair. The man inches a step closer, his hand raised in the air, closing in. Kerry doesn't think about his value to the mission. She can't stop looking at his glasses.



There's nothing there except for his scared expression when she blocks the punch and grabs him by the elbow. She hits him till he falls down, and then, her legs pinning him under her, Kerry hits him again. She can't seem to stop, her knuckles coming up red.

When there's a knife in her side, it dawns on her, slowly, feverishly. She'd forgotten. She'd let go of it just to fight him with both hands.

---

There's some feeling in her right side. Other than that, she can't get a read on anything. Even the air feels heavy, and when she tries to shake it off, it pushes her back down on the bed.

Cary's there too. Reading.

She'd told him to go but he stayed. Kerry has a plan: when she's able to move, she'll wait till he falls asleep on that couch. She's going to walk up to him and punch him in the stomach.

She fists a hand around the covers. There's new blood in her veins. Kerry can feel it moving: foreign, raw, and exactly her type. Exactly her blood. That's why he's here.

"You were hurt," Cary said when she'd woken up. "I was there."

"I still have your scars," he says now, out of nowhere. "And I used to find bruises everywhere."

"I hope they hurt—"

"I thought they were yours—"

Bullshit. Kerry would know if her pain wasn't just hers. Cary looks down at his book again. The thing is, she knows exactly what he's hinting at; that phantom pain of losing half a person. He keeps shifting through the pages, not really paying attention to any of it.

"You could heal me by magic," Kerry lets slip. She hears herself say the words but none of it feels very real, so she adds on. "You could let me disappear."

## *I Ought to Know You Blind*

Cary arches an eyebrow and, if she could, she'd turn away. Kerry settles for closing her eyes, and that's worse. She wants to be standing, dressed in her best suit, and ready to stab him.

She hears him shift in his seat. "I stole at you." Cary says it like he's said the words before.

Slowly, Kerry opens her eyes. There are lines across his face, more than on hers. But his limbs are all there, his body's whole and unbroken. Maybe he got free from her. Maybe her loneliness was just freedom in reverse.

She holds his gaze steadily. For a second he's painful to look at. It's right there, staring back at her from behind Cary's eyes. It's terrible and open and hers beyond doubt. But then he tilts his head back, and that open thing is gone. He's just Cary again. The man who isn't her anymore, so why would she try and pretend she knows what he's getting at.

---

"Don't start shit," Melanie throws at her when Kerry's back in Summerland. She wonders whether Melanie had this talk with Cary too, whether she walked up to him, stared him down and asked him to behave.

They're working together now. The fact that back at the hospital Kerry's never gotten around to digging an elbow in Cary's side apparently qualified them as civil.

As she watches him rewire an array of Summerland's machines, Kerry makes a list. His movements are slow and deliberate. His hands shake over the table, and he makes a fist to still himself. Kerry extends her fingers, makes a fist too. She's never slow like this. There's a split between them that, for eight long years, Kerry could only guess at.

Where there used to be a place for her in him, there's other stuff. Melanie said he was a fan of boxing, and when Oliver mentioned his recently developed affinity for fine wine, Cary knew what he was talking about. Melanie also laughs at his jokes, squeezes his shoulder, and congratulates him on the job well done.

"Oliver told me he—" Cary sighs, "He thought you'd be the one to run."

She knows exactly how Oliver would go about it: a sly smile, just for him and Cary, like, *that's what I wanted*. He'd said that to her too, years ago, a slight air of disappointment about him.

"He thinks you're invaluable," Cary adds, looking up at her.

"Sure he does," her mouth's set in a hard line, unconvinced.

"You don't trust people, do you?"

Kerry wants to dig an elbow in his side. *Are you fucking kidding me?*

Cary keeps crossing and recrossing wires, connecting them to the machine. He still does this thing with his hands. Like trying to explain, even when there's no audience. Well, except for her. *Oh*, she thinks. *That's why he's doing it*.

There's a place inside her where this means something. There's a tether pulling at the dead things inside of her, stirring them to life. That's how he used to communicate with her, his hands emphasizing the words back when his voice couldn't carry inflection. Cary used to talk about everything, like everything was something, like he could get any point across if she'd only listen. That's what she said to Oliver that night, eight years ago. "Cary talks with his hands."

"And you don't," Oliver drawled, his eyes unnerving and intent on her hand. Kerry'd clutched it into a fist, she'd hidden it under the table, but he saw.

"That's very interesting, Kerry." She didn't know then these words from him always meant death. When Oliver looked at her again, he'd smiled.

It took them a day. It took Oliver and Cary a day to unmake her. In a lab, Oliver tied Cary to the operating table. Kerry wasn't even in the room. She just felt cold all of a sudden.

When she saw Cary next, he had a small cut on his chin. Kerry pressed two fingers to her chin, just to see him flinch. Nothing happened. She pressed again, digging into the bone now. He didn't wince, he didn't even look up. It didn't hurt.

Kerry ran to him, pressed her hands to his chest, and nothing happened, again. Kerry reached out, grabbed him by the wrist, and tugged him closer. His body leaned into the movement, his feet stumbled over each other as his elbow dug in

## *I Ought to Know You Blind*

her side. She hugged him, pressed her arms into his sides, crushed his ribs, and felt nothing. No remnants of pain, no imaginary bruises forming on her torso. Cary was standing in front of her and she had to look at him to know he was there. Same skin, same clothes. Only they were stuck outside each other now—

The machine makes a high-pitched sound, bringing Kerry back to where Cary's staring at it in disbelief.

It makes another sound, like an alarm this time, and Cary freezes. She knows it before he knows it. Kerry crosses the room at full speed and tackles him, bringing both of them to the floor. Cary locks eyes with her for a second before everything explodes.

---

"Consulting is a very dangerous job," she hears him say, showing off the bruise on his forehead.

Kerry's fifty-five today but her birthday cake says thirty. The whole evening no one congratulates Cary, so Oliver must have kept his mouth shut.

The party's at her apartment, and as people bring food and drinks Kerry begins to ease into the noise. Cary's sitting in her favorite armchair by the window. He laughs at the jokes but sometimes he misses, not paying attention. Kerry keeps watching him from across the room, sipping on her gin and tonic. When she leans back on the wall, her shoulder aches. When they were digging the shards of the machine out of her back, he'd been there too, the red wound splitting his forehead. She winced. "I'm so sorry, Kerry," he'd said. It was the first time Cary apologized in eight years.

The cut of his suit is a couple of years out of fashion, but it suits him, in a way. If anything, Cary looks less out of place by being out of time. How very much like him, she thinks with no real no proof to back it up, to wear his age on display. He's gray and fragile and nothing in particular. Kerry's getting really sick of noticing him at every turn.

Benjamin comes up to her. "Here," he says, his eyes bright, a pile of old vinyl records in his hands. He watches her carefully, as she takes the records from him, not sure what to do about it. "Thank you," she manages.



She can feel Cary's eyes on her too. She doesn't like either of them like this. She likes it even less when Cary gets up.

Kerry goes to refill her glass before he approaches. She walks past the door and, for a second, Kerry considers it. She thinks, if she leaves now Cary won't know why. He won't know where. Only that's nowhere near enough. Kerry rolls up the sleeves of her shirt, readying for a fight she knows he won't give her.

"—music?" Cary says, vaguely gesturing to her record player, "You like—" He stutters when he looks up and Kerry's right in front of him, "Music?"

"No," she replies, all bite. Her mouth tastes bitter from the gin, from the word.

"She just hates when it's quiet," Benjamin cuts in.

Kerry's eyebrows shoot up. She doesn't dare blink.

Cary turns to her, eyes wider than usual and mouth half-open around his next sentence. She doesn't need it. She's going to kill Ben.

Kerry turns around and goes straight to her room. There're coats on her bed as if they aren't all living in the same building. She rolls her shoulder blades together and winces. The door closes behind her.

It's so obviously Cary. She knows that from his steps, from his breathing, from the way the air in the room suddenly feels electric.

He gives her a small smile and looks around. It's his birthday too. He's half a century old today and it shows. Kerry crosses her arms. One day he'll die and she won't notice. Nothing in her will scream.

Cary picks up a book from the high shelf. He won't be there in fifty years. Hell, he won't be here in a month, she thinks as her nails dig into her skin. He opens the book on a random page and starts to read. *Get out. Get out, get out, it's mine. You can't be here.*

Kerry wraps her arms around herself. She's all bone and muscle too, fight and blood and violence wrapped up together. She can barely hold still.

## *I Ought to Know You Blind*

“I have a present for you,” he starts. Kerry arches an eyebrow at that. “I have— I wanted to—” Cary goes on, his voice low and soft around the edges. Where Kerry had to sharpen herself into all this, he’d gotten comfortable. Delicate, almost, with his unmarked hands and the glasses that would cost him his life in a fight.

Even now, he doesn’t know how to get to his point. Cary keeps glancing up at her, puts down the book. Kerry gets a distinct impression that she scares him shitless, the way she stands in the middle of the room, unblinking, unnerving even to herself.

Carefully, Kerry takes a step. She places a hand on his shoulder. “Happy Birthday.” She aims for dry, but her words come out a pitch higher than usual. “There,” she offers, almost soft. “Give your present and go—”

“I thought I’d leave—”

Kerry doesn’t finish her sentence. The way his words seem to dig a hole in her chest, she’s not sure she can breathe. Cary stares at her. *I thought I’d leave.* He meant it as a gift.

*Ben*, she thinks all of a sudden. The way Ben looks at her and Melanie’s red puffy face after her fights with Oliver. That’s what Kerry must look like right now. Weak and pathetic and stupid and she can’t stop. What happens next is as much on Cary, as it is on her. She throws herself at him. Her fists curl at the lapels of Cary’s suit, and her teeth flash near his face.

Next, Kerry catches him by the elbow, her other arm going to the neck at an angle, easy. She could snap him in half, she could break a bone. With very little effort, Kerry slams his body into the wall. Now that she has him there, it’s hard to know where to begin. *I thought I’d leave.* Her rage isn’t blind. She traced the pain to its source years ago.

“You already left!”

So Kerry kicks him in the stomach, again, her left leg aiming for the hip.

“Like you couldn’t run fast enough!” She tries to punctuate every word with a blow.

Kerry tilts her head up to see the impact, to see him flinch, but his face is blank. It scares her that Cary can remain blank when she's finally all in, ready to draw blood. Suddenly, his arm is around hers, brutal against her skin, stronger than she anticipated. He lets go instantly, but Kerry's caught it. She feels older by centuries.

That old suit of his covers up most of his shape: in her mind, he's terribly, uselessly weak. She shifts her hold on his arm, feels for the muscle underneath his clothes. This Cary must know how to fight. He must also know better than to be this pliant, so he's *letting* her.

Her hands press at his chest. He doesn't look very breakable right now. His glasses are getting fogged up, and his mouth is slightly parted and it looks like it's as defenseless as she's going to get him. This is painfully familiar to her, almost convincing her that she could disappear, that his skin could break and swallow her whole. Cary places his hand against a scar on her ribs. *I still have your scars.*

She plants a kiss in the corner of his mouth. And when that doesn't work Kerry presses her mouth to his. She pushes against him at the hips, her chest, and her mouth, and none of it can bring him back. Her hand slips up, nails scratching against the skin on his neck and he winces. Kerry doesn't. She doesn't do anything, she stops.

It doesn't occur to her until he turns his face away, that it doesn't look like an attempt to reverse the science. Instead, it looks like the conclusion of all her stares across the room. Like she loves him and can't do anything about it except this. Like her anger took a turn, and that's where it decided to end up.

Her fingers look almost pale in this light. Kerry's fingers around his arm, on his suit, and how is this for trespassing: Cary looks offended, he looks like she's hurting him. Kerry uncurls her hand and they both breathe in again, in and out, in complete sync, which isn't even supposed to happen anymore.

This feels all wrong. Kerry backs down.

While still catching her breath, she turns to look at Cary. He's covered his face with both hands. It reads like guilt, like terror. It makes her want to fight him all over. It makes her want to get punched.

---

## *I Ought to Know You Blind*

The rest of the party is a blur.

She kisses Benjamin, open mouth and open eyes. She doesn't see Cary leaving, but he's no longer there when they cut the cake. And then there's only Ben left, smiling at her for too long and she's thinking, *sure*. At least him, Kerry doesn't want to punch.

She quite likes his terrible, selfish hands and her hungry mouth that takes whatever little is there to offer itself up. Kerry kisses his jaw when she has a hunch that he wants her to. She relishes in being so close and not knowing.

And through all of it, she keeps that terrible flicker of a feeling away from herself. Ben gets out of her apartment in the morning, fumbling with the pockets of his jacket and waving her goodbye with a smile that now seems permanently attached to his face, and Kerry still won't acknowledge it.

How useless it had felt. How she placed a hand on Cary's chest and tried to push herself there. How it was nothing but empty. It's just a metaphor. It's not a guarantee.

---

"I'm sorry. For hitting you."

Cary's slow, his ribs aching and bruised. For the first time, this knowledge doesn't spark anything. Kerry's just tired. He's just there.

He looks up from the blueprints of Oliver's latest machinery. It doesn't look like the hitting part is what's bothering him: he turns away and plants the palm of his hand right in the center of Oliver's design.

It's like studying herself in the mirror: the edge of the jaw, straight hair, the violence of teeth. But then, his violence is different from hers. He looks at her like she did something irreversible. And Kerry's not going to stand there and wait for him to scold her for something she no longer believes. Kerry closes in, just to keep herself from shifting on her feet.



His hand reaches to her shoulder. It's tentative and soft, a gesture meant to placate. Her mouth feels very dry, her arms won't bend again. It's nothing, it's nothing. This will never be enough. On a whim, she slaps his hand away.

"I don't want to have you!" She likes her cruelty. Like twisting a knife, he makes it so easy.

"I was you, having you is nothing!" Kerry inhales, cool air scratching at her throat. "Having you is worse."

She doesn't expect him to react, but he raises his hand. "Kerry," he blurts out, grits his teeth. "It wasn't good."

She stares him up and down. "I left because— I thought you'd—" Cary removes his glasses, pinches the bridge of his nose. "I didn't think you liked me very much."

It doesn't hurt, it hardly even registers with her.

"I took up too much space, and—" Cary keeps stumbling through the words. He gestures to her. "You would never have been this."

"Ugh," she cuts him off, dismissive.

"We got two lives out of one," he offers as if proving a point. It's math. Cary holds her gaze, his face open, and his words right there, between them. Doesn't he know?

She remembers never having enough. How she barely had time to think, everything around just so overwhelmingly *Cary*, before she even had the chance to make an impact. The unfairness, the ache in her chest, the way she used to press a finger to a bruise, just to see him flinch.

It's just that— She ended up with even less somehow. That, he failed to account for.

"You were my life." Her voice is so soft Kerry's not sure it's hers. She didn't know she could do that.

"And you left, and—" From the looks of him, Cary didn't know either: he stares at her, different now. Burnt. As if it never *occurred* to him.

## *I Ought to Know You Blind*

“I was— There was nothing special about me anymore.”

And then Kerry’s done talking, but she keeps looking at his hands, thinking, *it’s you. It’s Cary, it’s you, it’s you, it’s me, he’s me*. She’d missed it. Kerry examines the back of her hands. The scar tissue over her knuckles, the odd bend of her middle finger that hadn’t been set properly. She’d stumped everything in her that was his. She’d buried him over and over.

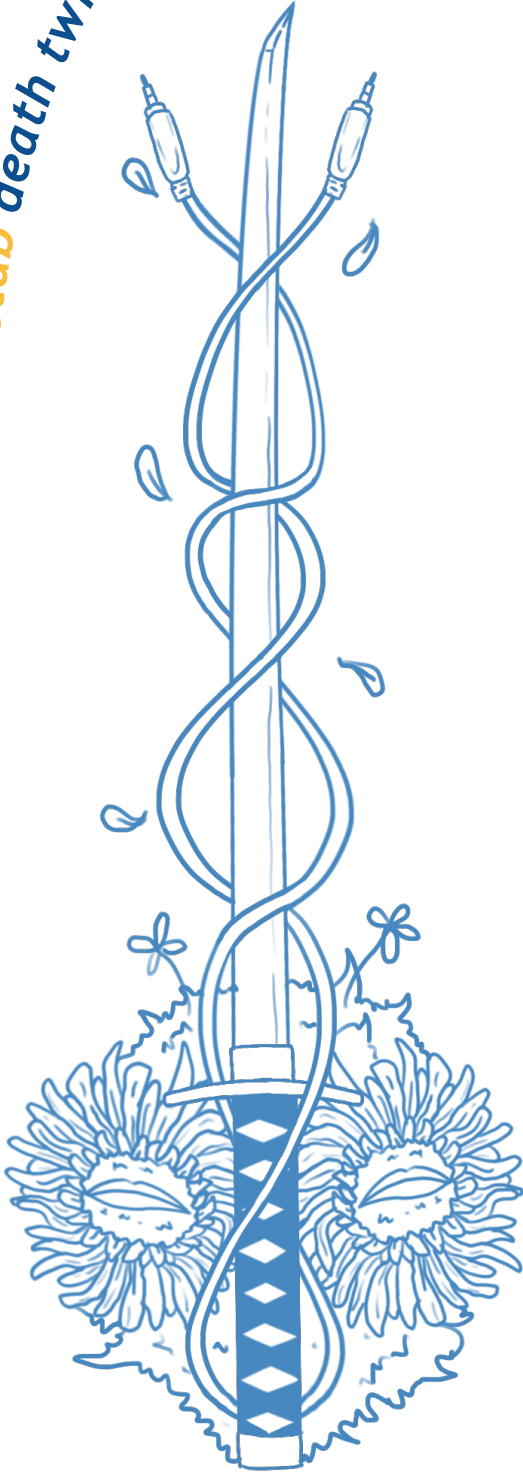
What Cary doesn’t say, what he is saying with everything but words, is you’re not alone now. His shoulders slightly bent, his feet solid on the ground. Cary doesn’t dare speak it but it’s there.

“Stay here.” She’s the one to say it. She’s sick of burying him.

He doesn’t have a life here. He has nothing here but her. And Oliver, and Melanie, and a job if he wanted one. And her.

He smiles and Kerry can feel it, the same joy tugging at the corner of her mouth. There it is.

*"I would **stab** death twice..."*



*... before he could **get** you."*





*David and Ruth - spacejeanss*



## *Cuddle Pile - Hexiva*







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