

## Chapter 1

Since I started at Columbia University I've only met great lecturers, and even in a place like this Professor Miles stands out.

His voice surfs assured on the background of busy pencils scribbling notes, on the attentive silence of a full classroom.

I am sitting in the first row, without taking notes, and when the class ends I don't move. My defiance burns against Arthur Miles aplomb as he throws glances at me, his eyes ironic but attentive.

We've established a ritual. After each one of his physics lectures I walk up to him and ask for a meeting. Everyone else meets him during his regular office hours, but not I. I go to his office right after each lecture, and raise all sorts of objections. I love these one to one discussions, and I know Miles does too. I suspect there's some gossip going on about my ways, but how important can this be?

Miles lets me in his office, and asks, "What is it this time, Iris?"

My coat and backpack are balled on my lap and I reply, without taking the time to make myself comfortable, "Your description of time arrow didn't sound very convincing."

Arthur Miles smiles, his brows arched.

I am unsure about how to articulate my thoughts, and noticing my inner struggle he nods encouragingly and says, "I'm listening."

I place my jacket and backpack on the side, shift on the chair and smile.

"Don't you think that all events simultaneously co-exist in an infinite plane, and that I am not only here, leading this life, but also elsewhere, in a different time zone, leading another life?" I start.

Professor Miles rounds his eyes, I cannot tell if in true or simulated surprise.

I lean forward and ask, "Do you know what I mean?"

"Not exactly," he replies.

"Don't you think we can simultaneously exist in different times and places? Isn't this what you once told us about the electrons orbiting around the nuclei of atoms? Electrons are in certain positions with a high probability and in other positions with a probability which is low, but not zero. So why can't it be the same for humans?" I continue.

"Do you believe you have an alter ego elsewhere at this very moment?" Miles laughs.

"I do. But when I say 'this moment' I am not talking about year 2016, I am talking about any moment belonging to the plane of time and space that defines me. I can be 'Iris the Norwegian Warrior' in year 1850, and 'Iris the Galaxy Explorer' in year 2200," I explain.

“What you’re telling me is that if we were to browse some Norwegian archives from 1850 we’d find your name?” Miles laughs again.

“Focus on the concept, not on the specific example. If the probability of ‘Iris the Norwegian Warrior’ is low, but not zero, a shift in the events might cause my name to appear in those archives. The lower the probability, the greater the shift in the events required for me to be ‘Iris the Norwegian Warrior’,” I reply with seriousness.

“And how does this shift happen?” Miles asks.

“Well, my plane of probabilities is linked to other planes of probabilities which can influence it,” I say.

Miles studies my expression in silence, and I sense a sudden turmoil whirl within him.

“How does my plane of probabilities influence yours?” he asks, unleashing forgotten memories.

“Once upon a time you and I travelled to a place of death to find something of infinite value. There was a large metal door, but I hesitated in front of it, swaying between awe, fear and desire. You stood beside me and took my hand, and for that one instant I felt safe. Do you remember?” I ask.

Arthur Miles cannot speak.

“Do you remember?” I ask again.

“You had this same dream?” Arthur Miles whispers.

“This same dream...yes. Was it a dream, Arthur?” I say.

## **Chapter 2**

The streets of New York City project cones of light through my windows, penetrating the darkness of my flat. The objects in my bedroom flicker between my sleep and wake as I lie in bed, eyes closing, opening, closing again, as I slowly lose awareness of my surroundings.

Then, at once, a wave of brightness washes over me and the night dissolves from my grainy vision.

The sky is clear, the sun hot. This is Boulder CO, I think, and I wonder how I got here. The city bears no similarity to its past appearance, and yet *I know* I am walking in Boulder. Isn’t Boulder close to the Rockies? Of course it is. And yet the path is covered in fine sand, and I am sure the sea isn’t far. The sand grinds between the laces of my sandals and my feet as I make my way through an open market. A myriad of colours blossoms on each stand: there are silken scarfs, earrings, hand-crafted items. I am fascinated.

And yet I decide to leave the market and to follow a new trail which snakes on a green hill, perfectly mowed. Once I get to the other side of the hill a familiar view opens before me and confirms that *I am* in Boulder, right in the neighbourhood where I used to live as a kid.

Shadow Creek Dr. has not changed. The wooden houses are painted in the same light brown colour, the pool is there, and people are playing in the tennis court. I can smell the pine trees and the asphalt softened by the burning heat of this summer day.

I start to run, a smile printed on my face, and I don't stop till I reach the house where I used to live: 2932, Shadow Creek Dr. The main entrance of the building is unlocked, and as soon as I step in the smell of carpet and wood wraps around me, the exact same way it did back then.

The wooden door of my old apartment is in front of me, locked.

I stare at it, wondering what's behind it now. What if someone stepped out? How could I explain my presence here?

I am about to walk away when the door opens. A man stands at the entrance, observing me intensely and yet without expression.

I gasp, unable to articulate an excuse. The man doesn't seem to need one though.

"Come on in," he says, "I was expecting you."

### **Chapter 3**

I stand in front of the door, unable to move.

"Come on in," the man repeats, opening the door further and accompanying his words with a gesture of invitation.

The carpet has changed since I last lived there - it is no longer light brown but green - and the walls, once painted white, are now covered in blue wallpaper. Apart from the poor taste of the new owner there's nothing objectively wrong with the place. And yet I find the ambience disquieting.

*Leave now*, I tell myself, and yet I can't.

The man waits, the door remains cracked open.

"I used to live here," I say, and the man nods as I walk inside.

I look around the living room.

"May I see my room?" I ask after an indefinite time.

"You know where to find it," he replies, before letting himself drop on an ugly blue couch.

I go through the corridor and at the end of it, on the right, I find my room. It's completely barren now, and, apart from its size and shape, it bears no resemblance to what it used to be. There's an eerie tension in it, as if it were about to fall apart, transform. I stand close to the entrance, hesitating to step inside.

I am still next to the door when I detect a vibration propagate along the floor, although I doubt the reality of my perceptions.

Then, suddenly, the floor squeaks and a crack opens right where my bed used to be. At first the crack is narrow, but then its lips widen and I clearly see that below the room where I am now lays my old room, unchanged.

Right next to my tiny bathroom there's the sink, with huge light bulbs illuminating the mirror. There's the fake bamboo chest with my stuffed panda sitting on it. And there's my bed, covered with the pink flowery duvet I used to love.

I approach the crack. I am so absorbed in my own thoughts that I don't notice the man walk in the room.

When he speaks his voice catches me by surprise, and I gasp.

"Is this what you were looking for?" he asks.

"I don't know what I was looking for," I reply, as I observe the crack into which I am irresistibly tempted to leap.

"Your life will change forever if you do, beware," the man says in reply to my unspoken thoughts.

I raise my eyes for a split moment, before letting myself slip into the past, oblivious to the present and the future.

#### **Chapter 4**

*What's with me?* I wonder.

It feels like I've landed here carried by the wind, just like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz.

The thought makes me laugh, and I am still giggling to myself when Arthur appears on the door of my room.

He grips the two sides of the door, a relaxed smile mirroring his open arms.

"Hi Iris," he says, and I light up with happiness.

"Hi!" I exclaim.

Arthur is dad's friend. I really like playing with him. Perhaps he's my best friend here in Boulder.

"You seem happy," he tells me, his smile broadening.

I shrug uncaringly, in an attempt to divert the subject. Talking about my feelings has always made me uneasy.

"You were giggling," he says, ignoring my attempt.

"I felt like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz," I explain.

"I see," Arthur nods, acting serious.

He might have understood me, but I am not completely sure about it.

"Do you ever feel like this?" I ask.

"Like Dorothy?" he laughs, and then, without waiting for my answer, he adds, "No, not really."

"I mean like someone else, not like your own self," I insist.

Now we're both serious, and this time I know Arthur is not faking it.

"I guess I do," he admits at last, letting his arms drop off the door.

I like it when Arthur talks to me as if I were a grown up.

I approach him and take his hand.

"Sometimes I wish I were a grown up," I tell him, and as soon as I do an image flashes back to my mind.

"You liked me when I was a grown up," I say, smiling at the confusion painted on Arthur's face.

## **Chapter 5**

I just woke up in a red convertible on a five lane street. The wind blows through my hair as I drive past a green light and Arthur is beside me, on the passenger side.

I have no clue about how I landed here, but at this moment I am happy. I have the feeling that I've known Arthur since I was a kid, although this might really be the first time I am seeing him. I wonder how I got to learn his name.

The broad road unravels under a broad blue sky, promising infinite possibilities. I smile, leaning my head against the seat.

Arthur looks at me, letting my mirth seep into him.

"You are right," he smiles.

"With regard to what?" I ask.

"You are right about what we were discussing yesterday," Arthur replies.

I wait for him to continue, hoping for an explanation that doesn't come.

"Can you remind me of our conversation?" I ask after a pause.

Arthur laughs, shaking his head.

“You’re strange today,” he says, and I shrug.

I am perfectly comfortable sitting beside this man.

“You remember that you and I are business partners, yes?” he teases me.

I laugh, pretending I do.

“Yes we are. What about it?” I ask.

“Of course you remember we’ve been building a time machine, your idea. If it works the way it should the world will no longer be the same. It all started from a lecture in which I discussed time and at the end of which you had some objections, as usual. And I must admit you had a point,” Arthur says with an unmodulated voice.

The plainness of Arthur’s tone is intended as a mockery. He’s far from guessing that I am learning about us from the fragments of information he’s delivering to me just now. I have a vague recollection of a lecture about time, but I would not be able to ascertain if this memory is real or imagined.

“And oh, I do hope you know we’re married,” Arthur adds, looking at me with a sardonic smile.

“I’ve always known,” I say, and the realization dawns on me at the same time I voice it.

“You’re crazy, but I care about you,” Arthur says, taking my hand.

I squeeze Arthur’s hand for a moment before I say, “You still haven’t told me what I was right about.”

“Yes, I haven’t. You always manage to divert the conversation, and every time I fall in your trap,” he laughs.

“You said that we should find a volunteer to test the time machine,” Arthur tells me.

“Did I say that? It makes sense. What if you and I volunteered?” I propose.

Arthur frowns and retreats his hand from mine.

“Well, we should believe in our project, no? If you and I want to defend our invention we should have the guts to be the first ones to try it out, don’t you think so?” I insist.

Arthur looks at me for a long moment, and I sense his resistance vacillate.

“Gosh Iris, you really are crazy,” he says.

“Is this a yes? I love you so much Arthur. So tonight’s the night?” I reply hastily, without leaving Arthur the time for any afterthoughts.

“Tonight’s the night,” Arthur agrees, as a shiver runs through his body, subtle and yet detectable.

## **Chapter 6**

The electrodes are connected to our temples, to our forehead, to our wrists, and to our chest. We've set the machine to operate in automatic mode, and the switch will trigger in one and a half minute from now. We look at the timer count down, and we sit immobile, thrilled and scared.

When there are only ten seconds left to go, Arthur turns my way and asks, "Are you sure?"

There's no turning back now. I nod, my heart pounding.

Then the switch triggers, and I sense something huge elate inside me, like an explosion, an immense ball of darkness expanding into blinding light.

It might tear me to pieces, efface my identity, and yet exhilaration is what I feel. I keep my eyes wide open, fascinated by my own evolution.

I float in a white immensity for an undetermined time. I am everything and nothing in this domain of infinite possibilities.

Then I sense my body gain weight, materialize, and recompose itself into a defined form. I perceive my own fall. The noiseless whiteness channels itself in a narrowing tunnel, the light turns into darkness and the silence into noise. I condense into a black dot of unbearable loudness, and jerk awake astounded at my own material existence.

I have a body and five senses, the same way I used to.

I see a broad extent of water.

I smell salt, and I taste it in my mouth.

I touch the moisture of what must be sand, based on its grainy texture.

I hear the waves sloshing rhythmically and I hear a voice, Arthur voice, calling my name.

"Iris...Iris, where are we?" he asks

I get up slowly and, at a distance, I see a monastery.

## **Chapter 7**

"We've been here before..." Arthur says, slowly getting up to his feet.

"I know...but when?" I ask.

Arthur observes the monastery, bugging his eyes.

"I cannot remember," he tells me.

I landscape the monastery, struggling to recollect our past.

“Something about that monastery scares me, and yet I feel that we have to explore it to understand a story that concerns us,” I say, and Arthur nods.

“Are you scared too?” I want to know.

“Uneasiness is perhaps a better description for what I feel,” he replies.

We’re silent for a while, and I sit on the sand, pensive. Then Arthur smiles a crazy smile and winks at me. This flash of unexpected playfulness uplifts the eeriness of the moment.

“Come on,” he tells me, offering me his hand and pulling me up.

“Come on,” I echo, “let’s go.”

The monastery seemed close to the beach, but the appearances were deceiving. The beach fades into a land where grass and sparse bushes alternate, followed by trees, twisted and dry. After a whole hour walking, we’re still not there. The distance appears to shorten, and yet the position of the monastery is like an asymptote we can only approach, but never attain.

Arthur and I stop, looking at each other with a questioning gaze.

“Arthur, what does this place mean to us?” I ask.

Arthur shakes his head, opening his arms and then dropping them to his side.

“No, we should not give up,” I insist.

I close my eyes and think, and some images start to reflux within me.

“We were looking for something, something very important to my family. We had come here to look for answers on how to find it. I remember that some other people were with us, but I cannot recollect who they were. Our clothes were so outdated...as if you and I belonged to a very distant past. Is this possible?” I wonder out loud.

“We just used a time machine, so I assume your memories are not impossible” Arthur replies, calm and logical as usual.

“The monastery was locked. We had to use a trick to enter it,” I remember.

“Which trick?” Arthur asks.

“Behind the monastery there was a graveyard. I was exhausted and disheartened when I found it. I remember that a dead army lay there, and I was terrified. Perhaps that’s where I died too. I remember knowing I had to enter a tomb to decipher my future-” I start, patches of memories and images emerging as blurred daguerreotypes.

“You’re a genius Iris!” Arthur exclaims, cutting my sentence and grabbing my shoulders.



I round my eyes in surprise.

"I remember, yes! We cannot reach the monastery walking in this direction," Arthur continues, invigorated.

I stare at Arthur with a clueless expression.

"Don't ask me why, but I am sure we have to go around the monastery. If we keep walking straight towards it along this direction we'll never reach the entrance," he explains.

I have no recollection of the memories I triggered in Arthur, but I trust his instinct. I let him take my hand and lead me, as he walks with eager haste on the ragged terrain.

In what I perceive as no more than few minutes we find ourselves in front of a fenced area, covered in moss and ivy. The light hasn't yet faded, but the moon is up, suspended in a diaphanous sky made of thin blue air.

"This is the graveyard," Arthur tells me.

The tombs are not visible, but perhaps they are buried under the thick green blanket bound by the fence.

"Odd the ivy didn't grow outside the fence," I notice.

Arthur hesitates a moment, then jumps inside the fence and says, "Come and help me."

He starts moving away the leaves, ripping away the tangled forest of ivy. We work like worms digging into an apple, without ever finding the core.

I am on the verge of giving up when I feel a hard, flat surface. My arms are dipped into the ivy, and I cannot see what I am touching. As I am trying to define its shape and size I sense a large block of stone slide under my hands. The ivy retreats around it, before dissolving away from the whole graveyard.

And at once all the graves are open before us, exhaling cold whiffs of unknown into the darkening night.

## **Chapter 8**

Arthur and I simultaneously reach for each other's hand, and we head to one of the open graves, without speaking a word. We know that's the one, without knowing why.

I am not ready to leap in but when we're no more than a foot away the grave swallows us, luring us into the narrow tunnel snaking within its intestines.

The darkness is thick and damp, and the walls of the tunnel are covered in what feels as moss to the touch. A light current of air wraps around our bodies, whispering hollow words which echo in the enclosed space.

As the tunnel twists in an indefinite number of circles, I lose count of the steps, turns and minutes we've walked for.

The walls narrow around us as we push forward, our bodies covered in cold sweat. I feel dizzy. I tighten my grip on Arthur's hand, he replies with a squeeze. We shiver, our hands mingled in fear.

And yet we've come too far to turn back just now.

I need to know what's at the bottom of the tunnel. I need to find my answers. I move my feet in blind determination, till I am numb to the cold, the fear, the unbreathable air. At this point I could proceed forever, or collapse without realizing I've reached my end.

I am close to collapsing but I don't.

Instead, suddenly, the tunnel broadens and the air thins and the coldness subsides. Darkness dissipates into a dim, yellowish light, revealing a small wooden door, very old, and yet perfectly polished.

Arthur looks at me, and I return his look with a smile, turning the knob of the door. It yields with the slightest squeak, and a library appears before us.

## **Chapter 9**

I cannot define the library's size. It seems small at first, and yet, when I let my eyes run along the bookshelves, bottom to top, I realize they're endless.

There's a solid oak table in the middle of the library, and I take a seat. A strange sense of comfort pervades me as I plunge on a cushioned chair.

Arthur moves along the perimeter of the place, brushing the books with his hands as he walks, as if trying to connect with the place by making physical contact with its material essence.

I look around instead, trying to capture the feelings the place inspires in me.

At a point Arthur stops, his fingers tracing the profile of a book, lingering on it. My eyes transfixed on it, I suddenly picture myself in front of an ampoule filled with a bubbling rosy fluid, as filaments of smoke evolve from its neck.

Why?

"Take the book, Arthur," I say.

Arthur turns around, slowly, and nods. He brings me the book, but when he is about to place it on the table his hands shake.

I observe his unsettled movements with apprehension, unable to intervene.

The book drops on the table and opens with a muffled thump, puffing clouds of dust from the yellowed pages.

Arcane characters from a long gone past cover the large, thick pages. Standing behind me, Arthur leans forward and our eyes meet on the first line of page 999.

*In the year 1850 Iris Sigurdsson departed for a perilous expedition to find*

“To find something you are forbidden to learn,” a voice thunders, shattering the muffled silence of the library.

## **Chapter 10**

Distaste more than fear is what I feel when I hear the voice, and I turn around, spitefully, to identify its source.

There’s a man standing a couple of meters away from us, not tall but corpulent and opulent. His traits are distorted with anger.

“Something I am forbidden to learn?” I repeat, “How so?”

“You’ve always been a rebel, haven’t you?” he replies.

I observe him closely, trying to recall when we’ve met, but to no avail.

“Always? Since when have you known me?” I ask.

“Since always, although your dismal mind cannot grasp the concept. You see why you cannot learn-”, he starts and stops abruptly as I return to the book, ignoring his words.

*In the year 1850 Iris Sigurdsson departed for a perilous expedition to find the key to the restoration of her father’s authority, and of her family’s longevity. Many enemies*

“Enough!” the man shouts without moving, and the book snaps close.

Now I am frightened, but not enough to surrender. I sense the man’s vulnerable side lurking under his thick flesh, his magic tricks.

“Many enemies, says the book. From your attitude I gather you are one of them,” I challenge him.

He looks at me aggressively, his eyes bulging as if he could grab me with his mere gaze. Perhaps he can, but I know – for reasons I cannot explain – that he won’t.

I stare at him for a dilated instant, and I am about to give up trying to define identity when a forgotten image flashes back to my mind.

“Uncle Ludwig...” I remember.

## **Chapter 11**

I recognize Uncle Ludwig, but before I can patch my shreds of memories into a coherent scenery I feel sucked into a vortex of darkness.

At once I can't breathe, I can't see, I can't escape the force rotating my body, piercing my ears, compressing my bones.

I am trapped for no more than few instants, before the vortex regurgitates me, leaving me weakened but alive. I find myself lying beside Arthur, my arm resting on his chest. I feel it lift and fall, and I know he's alive too. It's moist around us, and I am sitting on something hard. I open my eyes, slowly.

"Arthur?" I call, and Arthur replies with a snort.

"Arthur, are you ok?" I ask.

"Never been better," he replies, and I laugh, relieved that he hasn't lost his irony.

My muscles relax and I gather the courage to try and characterize our surroundings.

Water runs between the rocks surrounding us, and the place has the smell of salt and a faint odour of algae. We must be in a sea cave.

To reach the land, wherever the land is, we can only count on our battered bodies. I should be worried, if not desperate, and yet I am not.

Arthur's reaction is different, and as soon as he realizes where we are he says, "I wish we never stepped in that bloody time machine. It simply *does not work*."

"I love it here," I reply, and I really do.

The water, the promise of a revelation, of an unexpected turn: that's what I love, regardless of the risks our trip entails.

"How do we get out?" he asks me.

I pause to think, seeking an idea. I am about to stand up to inspect the cave to find an exit when the water begins to rise.

"High tide," I comment, as the level of the water increases by the second, till it's up to our chests.

I swim towards Arthur and tell him, "We'll be alright."

"Can you sense the current?" he asks me.

He seems calmer than before, as if he is surrendering to the ineluctability of the situation.

I do sense the current, and as Arthur and I hold hands we float on it, let it carry us in the recesses of the cave, till we reach a pool of clear water bathing in a cascade of light coming from above. Stalactites hang from the rocky ceiling, and their crystalline features shimmer in the light, dispersing their sparkle on the

placid surface of the pool. Through the transparent water I see rings of rock marking the depths of the pool. From top to bottom, the rings are white, light blue and yellow, before the pool closes into what appears to be a tunnel.

“Arthur, I think that’s the exit,” I tell him.

He looks up to detect where the light is coming from.

“No, I mean *that’s* the exit,” I say, pointing at the bottom of the pool.

Arthur stares at me, as if I had lost my mind.

It’s hit or miss, chances are we’ll drown, but something tells me we won’t.

“Come on Arthur,” I say, tugging his hand slightly.

And so we plunge down into the tunnel, swimming in water so thin it could be air, in endless blue, holding our breath till we can’t anymore.

Lack of oxygen slows my movements and my thoughts dissolve in regret and guilt. I’ve failed Arthur. There’s nothing I can do now.

My vision darkens and I’m about to let go, but right then, in that split instant before complete surrender, something hits me as an electric shock after a heart failure.

The brightness is so full it hurts, my eyes are wide open and yet I cannot see.

## **Chapter 12**

The bedroom is inundated by the Californian sun, and the dock on the bed side table says, 3 p.m.

Arthur is beside me, an arm folded over his eyes to shield them from the light.

“What time is it?” he mumbles.

3 p.m., I tell him, freeing my body from the sheets in which it is twisted and slowly making my way to the bathroom.

“Gosh,” he says, suddenly awake, sitting up abruptly.

I take some time to shower and recollect my thoughts, and 30 minutes later I return to the bedroom with a smile and some peace of mind.

Arthur is sitting on the bed, in the same position in which I left him.

“We need to perfect the time machine,” he tells me.

“That’s why we tested it,” I reply calmly.

"We risked never coming back," he says, lowering his eyes, almost talking to himself.

"I had a discussion about this with you" I start and pause.

"What do you mean with 'about this'?" Arthur asks.

I have a vague recollection of an office, of Arthur, of us engaging into a debate about time and space, of us remembering a door.

"You and I have met before," I tell him.

Before or after?

Arthur gives me a confused look.

"We need to perfect the time machine, yes. And you know why?" I say.

"I must find my answers, and I can't find them here," I continue, without waiting for his answer.

"Where have we been, Iris?" he asks me after a moment.

"You really don't remember?" I want to know.

"I remember what I *believe* I've seen. But *where* was it? And was it just a place existing outside of us or was it rather our shared fantasy?" Arthur replies.

I have no answers to these questions.

"Let's go back into the time machine. Now," I decide abruptly.

"No," Arthur objects.

"Yes," I insist.

He gets up, laces my hands with his.

"Iris..." he says.

We're not in the time machine, we're here, in our bedroom, in the real light of a real Californian summer.

Or so I believe till the room begins to melt, and Arthur's features dissolve and the light dims and I hear a repeated sound, irritating and familiar.

When I turn to the side I realize that I am in bed, alone, and my alarm clock reads 7 a.m.

### **Chapter 13**

I take a long shower and a hasty breakfast, and off I go, rushing to my practical chemistry class.

“The other day you learned about titrations in class with Professor Zimmerman. Today we are going to see how titrations work in practice...”

Our instructor Thomas Lovecraft speaks and I look around the lab, my focus shifting away from him. I run my eyes along the glassware, looking at the beakers, the graduated cylinders, and the pipettes neatly aligned beside the sink. Then, suddenly, my attention is captured by a distillation apparatus hooked onto a large glass ampoule. In it bubbles a pinkish liquid exuding heavy vapours, which collect in the coils of a distillation column and fall into a flask.

‘Experiment in progress, please do not remove – Kathrine’, says a note lying in front of the device.

I’ve never used this set-up, and yet *I know* how to. I think, *I know what it’s meant for, I used it to make potions*. The thought darts through my mind, and I formulate it without being able to decipher it.

“You will work in groups of two, so feel free to choose your partner. I’ll hand you an instruction sheet, which recaps...” Lovecraft keeps speaking on the background.

I will need salts and alcohol and at least one aldehyde. I will need to heat them and let them bubble till the sand will flow through the neck of a large hourglass twice, before initiating the distillation. I recite the recipe in my head, the echo of my memories silencing the instructor’s voice.

“Iris, are you with us?” the instructor asks me.

I am not.

“Iris?” he repeats, and this time the eyes of 30 fellow students looking my way draw my attention.

“Yes I am. My apologies,” I reply.

“Ok, so pick a partner and let’s get started,” he tells me, giving me an odd look.

The rest of the students busy themselves finding a partner, and I cease to be the focal point of their attention.

I hesitate, detached from the diligent crowd surrounding me. Lovecraft is about to address me again when someone approaches me.

“I’m Kathrine,” she says.

I look at the distillation set-up, at the note signed Kathrine sitting in front of it.

“I’m helping a grad student,” she explains.

Something in her is familiar, and I scrutinize her features in an attempt to retrieve the origin of my perception.

“And well, I also happen to do some interesting work on the side,” she adds smiling.

I am about to ask for an explanation when she raises her index and places it on her lips.

“Patience, Iris,” she says.

How does she know my name? Oh yes, the instructor called me by name earlier.

“Patience,” she repeats, before adding, “I have the keys to the lab, let’s meet here at midnight.”

## **Chapter 14**

The bottles of salts, alcohol and glyoxal, our aldehyde, shed oblong shadows on the bench. Working in the main lab would be too risky, and so we conceal our activities in the chemical storage room, in the dim light of a table lamp.

“Kathrine, I’ve never seen you before-” I start.

“Yes you have,” she interrupts me, smiling.

“I feel like we’ve met, not here at the university though. But then where?” I ask.

“You’ve always been impatient and undisciplined. Just like me,” she tells me, still smiling.

“Always? How do you know?” I ask.

“You have to be patient Iris”, she replies, instead of answering my question.

I am about to formulate another question but then I desist, and we work in silence for a while, side by side.

“Do you remember what you’re preparing?” Kathrine asks me after a while.

I shake my head no.

“What did you tell yourself this morning when you saw the distillation unit?” she prods me.

“That I knew how to use it,” I remember.

Kathrine nods encouragingly.

“Yes, and what else?” she insists.

I hesitate for a moment, before the thought flashes back to my mind with the same abruptness with which it surprised me this morning.

*I know what it’s meant for, I used it to make potions.*

“Yes, we’re making a potion,” Kathrine says, enunciating my unspoken words.



Then she pauses, and her eyes grip mine. There's love, sorrow and regret in her gaze, creased by an old woman's wisdom. Removing the nitrile gloves she cups my face and says, "My child."

I start to sob with a buried grief I cannot explain. Then the words speak themselves through my voice.

*One potion to restore the consciousness of all, one potion to know what's behind that door before it opens, one potion to let the glorious tree of the noble family live eternal.*

"One potion to restore your own consciousness, one potion to know what's behind the door you'll open, one potion to find the tree of your true family," Kathrine echoes, rephrasing my words.

Her face shivers through my tears.

"Now drink," she tells me, handing me the fluid we just produced.

A pinkish liquid sits in the beaker, filaments of smoke exhaling from its translucent surface. I swirl it around for an instant, then I close my eyes and drink.

## **Chapter 15**

I might be walking home. Perhaps I've already reached home, and I'm lying on my bed. I think I've closed the door. All is blurred though, and what has happened, what is happening now, what I will do next seems beyond my control.

The potion. I remember the potion.

And I was with...Kathrine.

Mother.

Kathrine is mother.

"You finally recognize me, my child," mother says.

Mother is dressed in a long black dress. She is smiling, but her traits are tired, her eyes filled with sadness.

"Mother..." I say, and motion towards her, arms open, needing her long lost embrace.

I am small now, and when we hug my face plunges into the softness of her belly. That's how small I am.

Mother smells of lavender, and I wish I could melt away into her pacifying aura, losing my identity.

And yet I can't. Mother pulls me away from her and says, "You must listen now, child, and you must remember."

I nod, tears suddenly pooling in my eyes.

“Tragedy haunted the royal family to which you belong. Your father the King once came to me to seek remedy, and I gave him the very best of me. I gave him you, my child. For nine months the Queen remained hidden to conceal the truth about your birth to the world,” she starts and pauses.

“Will you remember?” she asks, holding my shoulders, and I nod yes.

“Tragedy kept haunting your family, is still does,” she continues.

I frown, I do not understand.

“Tragedy is haunting my family...now?” I ask anguished.

“Yes tragedy keeps haunting the royal family, which will always be your family, even when you will no longer know,” mother tells me.

I still don't understand.

“You must go back to the monastery, that's where the key is,” she says.

“But-” I try to object.

“You must find the key, child. Remember me, child, I will visit you again,” she tells me.

I want to ask what she means, seek guidance, but as soon as mother ends her sentence she starts to dissolve and at once she's gone.

I stare at the point in space where she was, unable to move, choked by the lump in my throat.

I am still immobile when suddenly a hand grabs me, shakes me, and I scream, the hands shakes me harder and someone calls my name over and again, with desperate intensity.

Iris, Iris, Iris...

## **Chapter 15**

“Iris,” I hear again, and opening my eyes I see Professor Arthur Miles, bent over me, frowning and flustered.

“Hi,” I say, my voice hoarse.

“What on earth happened to you?!” he exclaims, relieved and angry at once.

“How did you get in?” I ask, instead of answering his question.

“The door was open,” he tells me.

“Oh...” I say.

“So what happened?” he insists.

“Ok, but how did you come up with the idea of coming here?” I ask.

“You phoned me!” he exclaims, emphasising every letter of his three word reply.

“Oh, I phoned you? I cannot recall that,” I say pensively.

Arthur remains silent, waiting for me to continue.

“I drank a potion and then I had a dream-” I start.

“You mean you used drugs and then you hallucinated?” Arthur retorts.

“We have to go to a monastery,” I state, ignoring his comment.

Arthur sighs.

“Which monastery are you talking about now?” he asks me.

“Are there any monasteries around here?” I want to know.

“Something weird is happening here,” he tells me.

“Arthur, do you know if there are any monasteries around here?” I insist, addressing him by name for the first time ever.

“There is a place four hours from here. It’s a very strange spot, I ended there long ago...” he starts, and pauses, lost in some thought.

“What about it?” I ask, “Why do you call it strange?”

“I...I cannot say,” he replies, his tone low.

“Let’s go,” I decide.

“I don’t know what we’re getting into,” Arthur mumbles, lowering his eyes.

“We are *already* into it, Arthur,” I say, locking my eyes onto his, still lying on the floor.

“Gosh Iris. Ok, let’s go,” he capitulates, offering me his hand and pulling me up.

## **Chapter 16**

I am awake, and yet my perception of reality remains shifty. All the familiar objects around me appear oddly foreign, known and yet in part different from the way they should be.

I am unable to define the hour of the day till I get in Arthur’s car and read the clock. 5:03 a.m., it reads. I wonder for how long I’ve slept before Arthur shook me awake.

“When did I phone you?” I ask him.

“At around three thirty, why?” he replies.

“I was just trying to rebuild the sequence of events. But how did you manage to find where I live?” I want to know.

“You told me when you called. Are you sure you remember nothing? It’s strange that your call reached me right then-” Arthur starts.

I look at Arthur, waiting for him to formulate his thoughts.

“It’s strange,” he repeats, and we drive in silence for a moment before he continues.

“I was dreaming when you called. The dream took place in a distant past, and I was a doctor. I was escorted in a rich carriage to a hidden place, situated in a rugged and remote land. The two men accompanying me led me into a small abode, nested in the cavity of a rocky wall. The place was filled with bottles and ampoules, and it seemed to me I had landed in an outlandish chemistry lab. I heard a muffled cry coming from a room I hadn’t noticed at first, where the men gestured me to enter. And there, lying on a black bed, I saw a woman in labour. She looked at me with pleading eyes, and when I sat beside her I couldn’t tell if she wanted me to help her deliver or to keep the baby inside her forever. “Promise you’ll take care of her”, she begged. I placed a hand on her forehead in an attempt to calm her down, but she was determined to get an answer. “Promise. Promise that one day you will remember to tell Iris that I am her mother, and that my name is Katrine,” she insisted.”

I gasp, and Arthur looks my way for a moment too long till a loud, continuous honk wakes us up to reality.

Our braided eyes turn in unison, clashing against the red traffic light we just burned, the head of a huge truck, and our cracked windshield, as time condenses into a frenzy of lost seconds.

## **Chapter 17**

Arthur breaks but it’s too late, our car hits the truck, it spins, my body hurts, my head feels light. I sense the car drifting off the road, beyond Arthur’s control, as my consciousness slips away.

When I regain consciousness all around us is darkness, and I reason that we must have ended up in a tunnel. Our car is moving, but I cannot find the manual break to stop it.

“Iris, are you ok?” Arthur’s voice emerges from the blackness in which we are immersed.

“Yes,” I say, “And you?”

“I’m so sorry, Iris,” he apologizes.

“Don’t apologize, tell me if you’re hurt,” I insist, the words quickened by the adrenaline still flowing through my veins.

“I’m ok, and I’d feel even better if I could understand what’s happening,” Arthur replies.

"Can you try to break?" I ask.

"I've tried already," Arthur tells me.

"I can't find the hand break," I say.

I hear Arthur feel around the car, and I sit still, holding my breath.

"It doesn't work either," he tells me after a moment.

"So the breaks are broken".

"I doubt it. There's something else happening here. Don't you have the perception that a force is pulling us somewhere?" Arthur replies.

"Are you scared?" I ask.

"No, not this time. Now I really want to see what's next," Arthur says, and a moment later we exit the tunnel, our bodies and car battered and yet still functional.

MONASTERIUMBURG, reads a wooden sign in the unpaved road unravelling before us.

5:03 a.m., reads the clock in the car.

"It seems like we got in the right spot in no time," Arthur comments, forcing a laugh to lighten the atmosphere, as we look at each other and shiver.

## **Chapter 18**

The breaks of the car have started to work again, and Arthur stops right in front of the sign.

"I need a moment," he says, resting his head on the steering wheel.

"We'll be fine," I try to comfort him, patting his shoulder.

"It might sound like a very conventional statement, but I think it's time for breakfast," Arthur unexpectedly tells me, raising his head.

I look at him, surprised by his sudden change in mood.

"Yes, miss. There's a bed&breakfast not too far from here, and I want both: the bed and the breakfast. No discussions. Unless I get some food and some sleep I refuse to go any further," he says in reply to my perplexed look.

"I have no objections, but-" I start and stop, completing the sentence with a desolated gesture to the empty road.

"Well, we are at the *boundaries* of the village of Monasteriumburg, but there's more to it than this unpaved road and these trees. Trust me," Arthur says with a jolly tone.

As we drive on I figure there's more to Monasteriumburg than the unpaved road and the trees, but not much more.

There's a gas pump, a couple of houses and a bed&breakfast, indicated by a large sign which must have looked trendy in the 50's but is now in a state of partial decay.

"So you've been here before?" I ask.

"No, not really," Arthur says.

"Then how do you know the place?!" I wonder in surprise.

"It was about 10 years ago. My marriage had just fallen apart. Friends kept inviting me to parties and dinners to lift my morale, but what I really needed was some time alone to digest what had happened. One weekend I took the car and started driving, with no real destination in mind and the GPS switched off. I have a good sense of direction, but after a while I got lost, and ended up in this town. I saw the monastery from a distance, and drove by this bed&breakfast. I wasn't actually sure I'd still find it here, but I'm glad they haven't closed it down," Arthur tells me.

"And you didn't stop back then?" I ask him.

"No..." he replies hesitantly.

"Why?" I want to know.

"Because when I did a woman approached my car and said, 'This is not the right time'. I remember it as if it were yesterday," Arthur tells me.

Now he is looking at me with startling intensity.

"Who was it Arthur?" I ask.

"Someone who looked like you," he says.

## **Chapter 19**

I don't know I'm scared till I sense my body shiver. For a moment I attempt to understand what is happening, but then I surrender, letting my hand slip into Arthur's. The shivers running through my worn out body gradually subside.

"Someone told me he'll refuse to take any action before having breakfast and having some sleep. I decided to follow the example of that wise man, whoever he was," I say.

"I never knew you could be reasonable. Since when has the change happened?" Arthur laughs.

"Since everything else started to be out of whack. I love contradictions," I smile.

“Ah, it’s reassuring to know that at least some things never change. Come on, let’s go,” Arthur tells me, opening the car’s door.

When we enter the bed&breakfast a blond girl welcomes us with a broad smile. The whole place seems stigmatized in time. The girl too, young as she is, could be born in the 50’s and never aged since then.

“Welcome back,” she tells us.

I look at her questioningly.

“Here are your keys,” she says, handing us a keyset hooked onto a bulky slab of wood with 503 written on it, in black.

“And we have those croissants you like,” she adds airily, pointing at the room next door.

“Thank you Katy,” Arthur says, smiling back at her.

He heads to the dining room and picks a table, looking around with a content expression.

“Arthur?” I say.

“Yes?” he replies, turning my way.

“Are you sure you haven’t been here before?”

“I’m not. I don’t remember being here, and yet it feels like I know this place and the girl,” he tells me.

“Of course you know the girl. You called here by name” I observe.

“Oh, did you not notice the name tag on her shirt?” he smiles.

“Would you not have known that her name is Katy without reading the tag?” I ask.

Before Arthur can give me an answer our breakfast arrives, carried by a plump lady, blond, all smiles.

“It’s good to see you again,” she says with familiarity, winking at us.

The croissants and the coffee exude their fragrant aroma, filling the room with the calming charm of known things.

We eat in silence, and then, suddenly, Arthur looks at me, smiling broadly.

“Don’t you feel like we just got married?” he asks me.

“Yes I do,” I reply.

For a moment I am surprised – almost startled - at the spontaneity with which the words come out of my mouth, before happiness dilates inside me, full and undeterred.

Arthur and I smile at each other, get up from our table and head to room 503, our hands laced together.

The two blonds wink at us as walk past them, and I ask Arthur, "When you said you wanted to sleep, did you really mean it?"

## **Chapter 20**

I open my eyes to a bright morning, an ultra-modern bedroom and an alarm clock tune ringing me awake. I moan slightly in protest of the unwanted sound and of the light gushing from the window.

"Are you awake?" Arthur asks me as I stir.

"Ehm...I had a strange dream...you were my professor and we were...somewhere," I mumble.

"Gosh. Where the hell have we been?" he asks.

My eyes slowly open.

"Where the hell are we now?" I reply, suddenly feeling as if I was supposed to be elsewhere.

Arthur jumps up.

He's still recognizable, and yet there seems to be something different about him.

"Why do you look so strange?" I mumble, still half asleep.

"Me? Strange? What do you mean where are we now? This is exactly where we are meant to be," he replies, bugging his eyes.

Of course, this is our bedroom, our alarm clock, and the man beside me is my husband.

"Yes, but yesterday night we were somewhere else," I insist.

"I don't know if I want to go back there," Arthur says gloomily, almost talking to himself.

"Were you not happy?" I ask.

"Happy, yes, and unsettled. And so were you. Next time we'll get the volunteers to step in the time machine," Arthur states.

"Sure, but-" I start.

"Stop. Next time we'll get the volunteers to step in the time machine," Arthur cuts me off.

I am determined to get Arthur to come back to the monastery with me, but this is not the right time to argue.

"Very well," I reply.



“Very well,” Arthur mechanically repeats, and springs off the bed.

I look at him without speaking.

“I’ll call them now, I think we can get started today,” he says.

“It’s 7 a.m., Arthur,” I try to reason.

“Two of the guys are academics, and all academics are morning birds,” is Arthur’s stubborn reply.

When Arthur is in his hyperactive mode communication with him is ineffective, and I head to the bathroom ruminating my irritation in silence. I personally selected the volunteers, and the time machine should become a commercial product. That’s the goal, and yet I cannot accept the idea of someone other than Arthur and myself stepping in it.

I have let myself steam under a flow of hot water flow for a long while, when Arthur steps in.

“Hey there, are you still alive?” he laughs.

“Do you need me?” I reply curtly.

“As a matter of fact, I do. I got a hold of three of our volunteers, and we’re starting the trial today. Come on, get out of the shower and let’s have breakfast. We’re getting our guys in the machine in one hour from now,” Arthur says briskly.

## **Chapter 21**

I’ve mentioned nothing of my plan till now, but when the three volunteers are in the time machine, almost ready to depart, I say, “The machine hosts four people.”

“Not this time Iris,” Arthur replies to my unspoken allusion.

“Why not?” I insist.

“Why not? Because we agreed that it wouldn’t be us to go this time. I need you here to do the monitoring with me,” Arthur tells me.

“There are things I need to know, Arthur,” I object.

“We’ll have time to go later on,” Arthur argues, but the previous assertiveness of his tone gives way to a pleading notes.

“I need to go. I’ll be back soon enough,” I state conclusively, stepping in the machine.

Arthur looks at me with a beaten expression, opening his arms in resignation.

“Please don’t give me that face. I’m not betraying you, you know?” I say, feeling guilty and yet unable to give up my decision.

“Ok,” Arthur replies, trying to disguise his anxiousness before turning around and pressing the switch.

## Chapter 22

I’m sitting on my bed, still wearing my nightgown. I look in the direction of the window, trying to define my spatial and temporal coordinates. The light coming from the outside has the brightness of summer mornings at 8 or 9 a.m. The hour has not changed since I entered the time machine, but from the look of what I am wearing I must have landed in a long gone century. My room is beautiful, arras are draped along the walls, the leaded glass of the window is finely crafted, and the furniture is made of good quality wood, elaborately carved.

I am unaware of my current identity, but judging from the surroundings I belong to a rich family.

Memories of a dream flash back to my mind – or was it another trip like the one I am taking now? Is there a difference? I recall my mother’s words, “The royal family to which you belong,” she had said.

I am pondering if I am in the royal palace, when I hear a knock on the door.

“Please come in,” I say, not knowing what to expect next.

A stiff woman impeccably dressed in a long dark dress opens the door.

“His Majesty expressed his wish to see Lady Iris,” she announces.

So I really *am* in the royal palace.

I nod, as a rush of adrenaline abruptly gushes through me.

When the king steps forward he fills the door with his presence, and when I see him – for this first unforgettable time - I gasp.

I am not intimidated by his size, the authority he exudes or the power he holds. What knots my tongue is instead my own reflection projected on him, a resemblance between myself and this man so striking I doubt – now more acutely than ever before – about the uniqueness of my identity.

“Iris, my child, it is time for me to speak to you with great urgency,” my father the King tells me, his frown deepening as his gaze runs from my charcoal eyes to my naked arms, my legs and feet, pale and exposed.

I observe the apprehension in the king’s eyes with tenderness, loving for the first time the father I’ve never met before.

“I am here to listen, father,” I tell him, smiling.

## Chapter 23

My father the King is silent for a moment, and then he starts, his voice calm. “My child, my reign is afflicted by famine and wars, the times are hard.”

“Our family has overcome hardships for centuries, there is no doubt we will honour our strong heritage,” the reply voices itself through me.

Father smiles.

“We certainly will,” he nods.

Then the smile fades on his lips, and he resumes, composed and yet pained.

“My child, I longed so much for your birth. I’ve waited for your arrival for the longest time,” he tells me.

“Father, I know the truth about my birth,” I say, my voice steady but my heart racing.

Father gasps, losing his composure for a moment.

“Mother spoke to me in my dreams,” I tell him, as I cannot define my encounter with my mother in any other way.

Father observes me, waiting for me to continue.

“I met mother in another life and in another time...” I begin and stop, unable to explain myself further.

The room falls silent, and Father takes my hand.

“Your mother Kathrine is a woman of outstanding power, and her gifts are beyond the human mind,” he tells me, bowing his head as he speaks.

“Where is she now?” I ask.

“She lives in the woods, in a land unexplored and wild,” he tells me.

“Father, we must speak to her,” I say.

Father nods his assent.

“You must,” he agrees.

“The times are hard,” he then iterates, “And the enemies are everywhere, even in the bosom of our very family. We need help from your mother Kathrine to succeed.”

“Uncle Ludwig is the enemy at the bosom of our family and-” I start.

“How do you know?” Father interrupts me.

I recount my encounter in the monastery, knitting together the fragments of memories into a patchy quilt of recollections.

“I cannot fully define what I’ve seen and heard,” I tell him.

"I know, my child, and what I am about to tell you know is no less extraordinary than what you described," my Father says.

"What is it, Father?" I urge him.

"You have a brother, Iris, and he lives within you," father's words fall on me, slowly and heavily.

I instinctively touch my body, my hands trembling, and I am about to about to ask questions the answers to which I need and yet fear, when a shattering clamour invades the room. Voices, clattering metal, horses neighing and stomping their hoofs in frenzy, flood the air with anxious vibes.

"My child-" Father starts, when the door opens abruptly.

"My king, the enemy has reached the castle," a man announces, his ruddy face flushed and his hand gripping the hilt of a sword hanging from his thick leather belt.

## **Chapter 24**

"This way," Father urges me, opening a trap-door I had not noticed till this moment.

I let myself slip inside. When my Father closes the door darkness is almost complete and yet, somewhere at a distance, I perceive a presence and a flickering flame.

For an instant I hold my breath, stiffening against the rough walls of the tunnel. Should I trust this presence?

"Iris?" I hear.

I attempt to find a link between the sound of this voice and a familiar face.

"Iris?" the voice calls out again, and I realize that who is calling out my name is Matt, one of the two volunteers.

"Matt, what are you doing here?" I ask surprised.

I wonder how we all ended up in the same point in time and space. Isn't the machine supposed to move people along different domains of time and space?

Matt seems to sense my unspoken question, because he tells me, "Our stories are intertwined, that's why we're meeting here."

"Are you alone?" I want to know.

"Wilhelm is with me," he replies.

The flame flickers with increased intensity as Matt and Wilhelm approach me.

"But...but did you know this?" I mumble.

"This? You mean the fact that our spatial and temporal domains have common regions?" Wilhelm asks, speaking for the first time.

"Yes," I reply.

"I didn't know for sure, but I suspected it," he tells me.

"Why?" I inquire.

"Because you picked us to do this journey. Deep down *you* were the one who knew," he observes.

I try to ponder his words, but too much has been happening for me to think straight.

"So where do we go from here?" I wonder out loud, not really expecting an answer.

"Follow us, the journey is about to begin," they tell me.

## **Chapter 25**

We walk in silence for a while. There are burning questions I need to ask, and yet can't. What holds me back is perhaps the fear to know, perhaps the fact that I don't fully trust my guides, or yet again pride. I want to be able to count on my intelligence alone to find the key to the mystery that concerns my family.

Matt seems to sense my thoughts, and slowing down he turns my way.

"Arthur, not us, is the one you should beware of," he tells me.

"Arthur?" I ask, incredulous.

"Yes, Arthur," Matt iterates.

"Why do you say so?" I inquire.

"You think your uncle, Sir Ludwig the Second, is in the enemy, and so does your father our king. Your uncle is not on your father's side, or on yours, and yet he can be a good source of information. Nobody but him knows about Arthur's machinations," Matt tells me.

"How can you possibly believe what my unde told you?!" I exclaim, enraged and relieved at once.

"Iris, the queen is sterile," Matt starts and pauses.

I start. They too know my secret. I feel exposed, suddenly trapped in this black tunnel where the only source of light is the torch Matt is carrying.

"You needn't fear, Iris. Your father would have not put you in our hands unless our loyalty had been proven beyond all doubt", he reassures me.

"What does Arthur have to do with the queen's condition?" I want to know.

“Arthur has been the royal family doctor for a long time,” Matt starts.

“Right, so he couldn’t cure the queen. This makes him at most incompetent, not guilty,” I reply defensively.

“Maybe he did more than not curing her. Maybe he caused her infertility,” Matt says, insinuating a doubt.

“Maybe, or maybe not. What is the rationale for your accusations?” I challenge him.

Matt does not reply though, and turning his back to me he marches forward, hastening his steps. I follow, stomping angrily, head down. I am about to repeat my question, when the air stirs, the darkness turns into dim light, and the heavy silence transitions into a suffused sound.

Matt and Wilhelm stop, and look at me for a long moment.

“Come on over, Iris,” Wilhelm tells me at last, “This is what you need to see.”

## **Chapter 26**

A mirror of water lies in front of me. It is crystal clear, and its surface mirrors a sky, endless and pristine, populated by foamy clouds floating in its immensity. I look up, my eyes searching the sky reflected in the water, but all I find is whiteness, vast and beyond definition.

The scenery is beautiful, and yet I sense there’s a dark mystery behind it. My mystery, the mystery of my family.

I turn to Wilhelm and Matt, my gaze questioning and pleading at once. Wilhelm smiles at me, and takes my hand.

“Be brave Iris, you have nothing to fear. We are here with you, but we cannot be you. You alone can read the secret words,” he tells me.

I approach the water, cautiously, observing its surface with anxious eyes. I expect something to happen, but the water lays immobile and silent before me. I squat in front of the water, and I begin talking to it. I cannot say if my words are resounding in my head or if I am speaking them out loud.

*Please tell me, tell me...whatever it is, please tell me...*

I close my eyes. Head hidden between my knees and hands tight on the base of my neck, I feel nothing but a small bunch of fragile bones. I start to sob, letting the tears dribble down my pale skinny legs.

I am still crying when I detect a whooshing whisper. I raise my head and through the tears still fogging my vision I see the water turn deep red and sizzle, letting out black filaments of smoke.

I gape at its evolution, mesmerized.

Then the bubbling subsides, and the surface turns into a smooth plane of darkness.

I see Arthur, standing in front of a woman's bed and handing her a flask filled with a green fluid.

*Drink, my queen*

*My queen*

*Queen*

*Een*

The words echo around me, Arthur's voice distorted and unfamiliar.

"Stop Arthur, stop!" I scream, covering my ears.

My eyes are wide open though, and I see, clearly and unmistakably, the queen take the flask and bring it to her lips.

I wish I didn't have to see, and yet I am unable to divert my eyes from the scene.

The queen raises her eyes towards Arthur, as if to ask a question her lips cannot articulate. Then the tension in her body melts down, slowly and almost voluptuously, and seconds later she is fast asleep, lips parted.

With swift movements Arthur produces a small bag I hadn't noticed till this moment. Holding a bottle under the queen's nightgown he moves his fingers along her body, tracing patterns I do not comprehend. In her sleep the queen gasps, the lids of her closed eyes cringe, her face turns into a mask of despair.

I stare at her, holding my breath.

Arthur continues tracing obscure figures on the queen's skin, till her body arches, her legs stiffen and her nails carve into the palm of her hands so hard that rivulets of blood drip on the white bedsheets.

Arthur lifts the bottle he had been holding under the queen's nightgown. It is filled with the same green liquid the queen drank, but in it floats a small black entity.

Arthur observes it, as if amazed by its presence in the bottle, and I observe it with him.

I notice something in it is pulsing. It has a heart, yes, a heart, and it is then that I realize that I am looking at an embryo, albeit a distorted, sinister, unfamiliar embryo.

"And now, Ludwig, we'll bring you to a place where you can no longer hurt us," I hear Arthur say, smiling in calm satisfaction.

"Where, Arthur?" I ask, forgetting I am a spectator of a scene to which I don't belong.

Arthur seems to hear my voice from whichever reality he is into, because he stops short, and looks first at the queen and then at the room, with an expression suddenly filled with apprehension.

"Iris?" he calls.

"Yes," I have the time to say, before being drawn in a primordial world of blackness.

## **Chapter 27**

In the darkness I perceive a rhythmic pulse, steady and reassuring, to which the beat of my own heart conforms. I have not felt so whole and protected as I do now since I can remember.

I hear mother's voice. I recognize it, although it resounds in a peculiar way, as if I were listening to it from inside a soft shell.

"Will she be able to carry this burden?" she asks.

"She is strong, she can do it," a second voice says.

It's Arthur's voice. It too sounds muffled, distant.

"She cannot protect her brother alone, you will have to help her, Arthur. Promise," mother commands.

"I promise," Arthur says.

"There will come a day when she will have to discover the secret she carries, and that day you will have to be by her side," mother continues.

"I will," Arthur vows.

I sense something stir beside me, and I realize that I am not alone.

"When Iris will be outside my womb she will be exposed to a world where I will be able to offer only limited guidance," mother says, her voice sad.

*Outside my womb:* the words reverberate within me. I am in my mother's womb.

"Don't worry," Arthur says, and from the vibrations I receive I sense that he must have touched her. Perhaps he is holding her hand now.

I perceive the edge in mother's tension dissolve.

"Lie down now," he tells her.

The presence beside me stirs again, and this time it touches me. I feel love for this presence, it is part of me. I move, and as we come in contact for the third time I realize that I am beside my brother.

Mother lies down, and I sense the shift in her body, the change of direction in my own posture.

"Hand me the potion," she tells Arthur.

There is a long silence.



“Hold my hand now,” she asks him.

I hear a gurgle, a flow of fluids, the potion seeping inside mother’s body.

Then a sudden wave of heat gushes around me, and it is so intense it almost burns me. Mother screams, but it is not pain she is feeling, rather heartbreaking sadness for what will come next.

The heat burns hotter and hotter, and then, at once, I sense myself swell, almost to the point of bursting, and my cry resonates within me with shattering force.

Then the heat subsides, and my swollen self adjusts, with painful slowness, to its new self. I hear three heartbeats beat in unison, one inside the other, like those of a human matryoshka: my brother’s heartbeat inside me, my own heartbeat inside mother, and the strongest heartbeat - mother’s.

In the darkness of this womb, for this one moment in time, I feel immense clarity. I know who I am: I am sister, daughter and mother.

Then something breaks, and mother begins to scream. The softness around me turns into painful spasms, it twists and contracts as if it suddenly refused my presence within it.

*Why? I need to know. Why is it rejecting me?*

“Push, Kathrine, push!,” Arthur encourages mother.

Mother’s labour has started.

## **Chapter 28**

A flood of light burns my eyes. The outside air suffocates me and the world suddenly turns into a hostile place where I am no longer safe. I feel weighed down by an old burden I can no longer remember.

Mother, mother, mother...I cry in the inarticulate language of new borns.

“Iris, calm down...Iris,” I hear Arthur’s voice try to sooth me.

“Why? Why did you do this to me? Why did you get me out?” I scream, ignoring his attempts, gripping his arms and shaking them with anger.

“Iris, what is happening? Where have you been? When Matt and Wilhelm came back you were not in the time machine. And now I’m finding you here, right beside me. Thanks God. I tortured myself all night, I couldn’t fall asleep for the longest time and at last I collapsed, not knowing what to expect when I’d wake up. And no, you are not going in that machine without me ever again. Understood? Never,” Arthur speaks in frenzy. Now he is the one who’s gripping my arms.

Arthur’s grip and voice shake me out of the trance in which I awoke, and I realize where I am.

“Sorry...are you ok?” I ask.

"I am not," Arthur retorts, "I am most definitely not".

"Because I went missing?" I ask, my voice soft now.

"Yes, because you went missing. But that's not all," he replies, his tone snappy.

"What else, Arthur?" I want to know.

"What else...how can I phrase this...perhaps I am not at all who I think I am," he replies, his tone angry and disheartened at once.

"Tell me what happened," I insist.

"Bloody time machine. This would have never happened had we not come up with our most brilliant invention," Arthur curses.

"Arthur, tell me what happened," I repeat.

"Wilhelm and Matt must have learned something about me, something I have forgotten. Whatever it is I've done, it is not a good thing. I think I've betrayed you. There you go. Now you know too," Arthur says.

"Why do you say so? What have you done?" I ask.

"Wilhelm and Matt did not want to get close to me after getting out of the time machine. They said I was not to be trusted. They pointed their fingers at me and said, 'Most of all, stay away from Iris'. God, that hurt. I always thought that if I'd let you down I would never be the same person again, and now I found that I actually *did it*. When you didn't come back I thought...I thought-" Arthur starts, and does not finish.

I struggle to believe in people's love for me, perhaps even in Arthur's love for me. I doubt him even if I love him fully, or perhaps precisely because of that. I suppose it's a mechanism of self defense. And yet, seeing him coiled in a corner of the bed and tortured by the thought of having betrayed me, I am touched. Tears pool in my eyes and I hug him tight. I wouldn't ever want to let go of this embrace, and I wonder for how long Arthur will let me hold him.

The answer is: not for long.

"I must go see someone now," he suddenly says, getting up.

"Who do you have to see?" I ask.

"Her name is Kathrine, and she's a psychic," Arthur replies, and leaves before I can utter a single word.

## Chapter 29

I feel like a caged animal sitting here at home while Arthur is out there to meet Kathrine alone. I feel excluded. I wish he could trust me enough to share his fears with me, even if I realize that he needs to be alone to face them because I *am* the object of those fears.

Who is Kathrine, by the way? Is the psychic's name a pure coincidence or is my mother playing the chameleon again?

I am restlessly pacing back and forth when, out of the blue, I start to think about an abandoned mine 100 miles or so south of here. One day Arthur and I had driven past it, and I had felt the urge to stop.

Arthur had asked me why it was so important for me to enter the mine, and I had shrugged, unsure about the answer.

"But how do we get there by car?" he had objected.

"Slow down, there must be a way," I replied stubbornly, and sure enough a moment later I spotted a side road with a ragged sign marking its destination.

Mine 503, it read.

"There!" I exclaimed exultantly, but too fast.

A couple of miles later we found a barricade closing the road.

Arthur slowed down, stopped the car, and sighed.

"Sorry Iris. It's not meant to be," he told me.

"But can't we just leave the car here and walk it?" I insisted.

"Iris. No. There are times when it is ok to give up, you know?" Arthur told me, his tone patient, as if he were lecturing a kid.

"No, I don't know," I replied.

"Of course you don't, but now I'll turn the car and we'll head home," Arthur said, his tone conclusive.

I dropped silent, frowning.

"Come on, don't be upset," Arthur added, patting my leg.

Why wasn't it meant to be? Why was the road closed? There are hundreds of closed roads, but there was something eerie about *that* specific road being closed. Or maybe I am just imagining.

I sit on the bed, eyes closed, trying to reconstruct the details of the place.

Mine 503: I wonder why the mine is named this way. Then flashbacks dart through my mind. 5:03 a.m., read the clock in the car when we left for Monasteriumburg. 5:03 a.m., read the clock in the car when we reached it. 503 read the keys of the bed&breakfast where we had stopped there.

I shower hastily, grab the car keys and head out to find the mine.

### **Chapter 30**

This time the road to Mine 503 is open, the barricades have been moved to the side, and I drive past them.

I stop, and when I open the window to landscape the place a wave of heat invades the car.

The mine is a reversed crater, a black cone streaked in red, filled with silence. The air, liquefied on the cracked soil, stands immobile.

Old machines are lying around, scattered as solitary dormant beasts, waiting to be revived.

There's a building not too far from the mine. The conveyor belts are still loaded, as if someone had turned off the switch in the middle of the operations, or if time had frozen at once.

I pull up the window and start driving to the building, moving slowly on the rugged ground. As I approach it I realize there's a paper sign on the door, modern and mint clean, strangely avulsed from the style of the surroundings.

I get out of the car and motion towards the door.

"Open art day, come on in!" says the sign.

I am about to push the door, when I see it open before me. I leap backwards, caught by surprise.

"Hello there!" says the girl who opened the door with a reassuring smile, as if she had somehow been expecting me.

"Hello..." I reply hesitantly.

"I'm glad you decided to drop by," she continues.

I study her good natured features, her orange hair, her green eyes, her apron.

"May I offer you a homemade rhubarb lemonade?" she asks.

I remain silent, adjusting to the disquieting and yet captivating vibes of the place.

"If you want to make a donation the money will go to a charity, and if you don't the drink is on the house," she continues, earnest and constantly smiling.

"Of course I'll be glad to give a donation," I reply promptly.

"We support archeological studies that are underfunded. Now we're sponsoring a project in a small town, Monasteriumburg, not far from New York," the girl continues, and I shudder.

"Do you know the town?" she asks, noticing the sudden change in my expression.

"I...maybe, I can't remember," I mumble, lying.

"We've created a nice documentary about the study in Monasteriumburg. I'll show you," she tells me.

I follow the girl, hypnotized by the sound of her steps resonating in the hollow greyness of the hallway.

### **Chapter 31**

"Here," says the girl, stopping in front of a metal door, grey and tattered.

Theatre 503, reads a black label stenciled on it.

The girl smiles at me, oblivious to the expressionless mask through which I am trying to conceal my fears.

She produces a bulky set of keys attached onto a heavy metal ring, and the lock opens with a cavernous thump.

"Here" she repeats.

"Have a seat, I'll go to the other side to start the documentary," she adds, walking out of the room.

To the other side?

Large red pillows are scattered around the room. I pick one very close to the screen, in the center of the room. It wraps around my hips as I seat, and I cannot decide if I feel as if I am being swallowed by a carnivorous plant or cozily embraced by soft flesh.

The screen rests inanimate for a while, before I hear a crackling sound behind me, and sepia colored images form on the screen, shapeless at first and then grainy but recognizable. A group of men and women are working around what appear to be remnants of an aircraft or a military device. It's strange how I seem to know the people in the documentary. I must be imagining. I am still rubbing my eyes to brush away the thought, when a voice breaks the surreal silence of the room.

"I remember this...it was my spaceship," the voice whispers. And the voice is unmistakably mine.

The group's eyes are transfixed onto the woman who just spoke.

"Perhaps you need a break, Iris. You've been acting strange lately," one of the men says.

It's unde, I am sure.

"Perhaps *you* need a break," intervenes one of the other team members, and that's Matt.

“What are you talking about?” Uncle Ludwig retorts.

“He’s talking about the fact that lately you don’t seem like your usual self either, Ludwig,” another man replies calmly. It’s Wilhelm.

I look at the scene, mesmerized.

“Iris...” I whisper.

The Iris on the other side of the screen looks my way and bugs her eyes, incredulous.

Then she turns towards Arthur, her gaze questioning and pleading at once. He looks at her, and then at me.

“Arthur!” I exclaim.

He freezes for a moment.

“Arthur, why did you leave without me?” I ask, suddenly remembering his rushed morning departure.

Instead of answering he looks in turn at me, on this side of the screen, and at the other me.

“What do those remnants mean to you, Iris?” I want to know, addressing the other me.

“Don’t you remember them?” she asks.

Leaving the red pillow, I move closer to the screen. From this distance I cannot discern what I see on the screen, and yet – abruptly – an image impresses itself on my eyes and I remember.

I am cruising in a sea of blackness punctuated by dots millions of years away from me. I press a button.

*“Arthur,” I say.*

*“Arthur will answer the call in 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 seconds. You will speak to Arthur in 0 seconds,” a female voice clearly enunciates.*

*“Iris,” Arthur replies.*

*“Let’s meet at point 503”, I tell him.*

*“I’ll head there now,” Arthur says, and a smile forms on my lips.*

*“Great!” I exclaim.*

Yes, those are the remnants of my spaceship. I recall how the future used to be.

“Yes, you’re right Iris,” I tell the other me on the opposite side of the screen.

“We must cut this connection, it’s too risky!” I hear, but I cannot place the source of the voice.

“No, no!” someone screams in reply, and this time I can identify the speaker.

The resemblance between the man who just spoke and me is startling.

“Don’t go, please don’t go,” he pleads, his fingertips pressed against the screen, on the side opposite to mine.

“You can’t go to the other side, not for now,” Arthur intervenes, patting his shoulder.

“Arthur, what is happening?” I want to know.

“I cannot fully explain...” he replies hesitantly.

“Arthur!” I insist.

“We must cut this connection, it’s too risky!” the voice screams again.

“Arthur!” I repeat, my voice peaking.

Arthur presses his fingertips against the screen, the same way my male alter ego had done, and I move my hands forward, impulsively, trying to embrace him.

Something like an electric shock flashes through my arms, I feel sucked into a new element, my head spins.

“Arthur!” I scream, reaching to the other side to pull Arthur towards me.

The screen deforms as Arthur’s face pushes against it, and I pull harder, digging my nails in his back. Then I lose my balance, and Arthur and I tip over to my side.

“We must cut, cut, cuuut, ccccut, t, t, t” the voice screams and then crackles, agonizing.

And all is quiet again. The screen is grey, the room disturbingly silent.

“Arthur?” I gently say.

Arthur, limp on top of me, doesn’t reply.

“Arthur?” I repeat.

Again, no answer.

“Hey, Arthur!” I call a third time, tipping Arthur over.

Eyes closed, Arthur lies on the floor, motionless.

“Arthur!” I shake him, but to no avail.

## **Chapter 32**

“Arthur!”, I scream one more time, tears rolling down my cheeks.

Holding my hands over my ears I crouch, swinging myself back and forth, and think, Arthur cannot be dead. And yet I know he is.

I keep rocking myself the way kids do, crushed by the pain, when I hear a sort of gurgle, muffled at first, then louder, accompanied by a fit of cough.

“Arthur!” I exclaim.

After a good amount of coughing he finally manages to say, “Iris, where are we?”

At the sound of Arthur’s voice my tension melts away in laughter and tears, and I hug him so tight it hurts.

“What happened and where are we?” he asks again.

“We’re in Mine 503”, I tell him.

“The one where we didn’t stop in the past because the road was blocked, remember?” I continue, noticing the blank expression on Arthur’s face.

“Oh yeah...” Arthur recollects.

“And you were *there*” I add, pointing at the screen.

“What?!” Arthur exclaims, bugging his eyes.

“We need to get out of here, I’ll explain later” I urge him.

“Why do we need to get out of here?” Arthur wants to know.

“Because it’s not safe” I tell him.

Arthur observes me for a moment, frowning in the peculiar way he does when he is processing too much information at once.

“Wait...you said Mine 503?” he asks after a moment, and I nod.

“This is where it all started” he states enigmatically.

“What do you mean?” I ask, puzzled.

“This is where my trip started. When I got into the time machine, I landed here. I walked around, and strangely enough I found a bike lying on the ground. I hesitated for a moment, but there was really nobody in sight and I decided that the bike couldn’t possibly belong to someone. Or perhaps it did, but I took it anyways. Then I did something really odd, I don’t know how I came up with the idea” he starts and pauses.



The image of Arthur pedalling all the way to the center of the mine dawns on me. He is hovering above the ground rather than truly pedalling on it, in a surreal and yet strangely convincing picture.

“Did you pedal all the way down to the center of the mine?” I ask.

“How do you know?” Arthur starts

“In actual fact I don’t,” I shrug, “I mean, it doesn’t seem possible to do so.”

“It doesn’t seem logically possible and yet I imagined doing it and then I just *did it*”, he tells me.

“And what happened next?” I want to know.

“The mine cracked open and I began to fall. The fall seemed endless. I thought I had either fallen asleep or died. The darkness was complete, and after a while it felt like I was no longer moving. I had reached a sort of internal peace and gotten to accept that I was dead when I found myself, suddenly and inexplicably, in the middle of a windy road,” Arthur says and pauses.

“What about it?” I prod him.

“I remembered that road, I had been there as a kid. My family and I had gone for a trip to the Netherlands and we had camped around a place called Valkenburg. There was an old castle there, crippled and eroded”, Arthur remembers.

A sense of uneasiness dilates within me as I listen to Arthur’s memories.

“One day we rent bikes and cruised around Valkenburg, and landed in a street that reminded me of the one I saw today, at least at the beginning,” Arthur starts.

“And what happened next?” I ask.

“Today the scenery changed as I biked and I found myself in an ambience that looked Dutch and yet-” Arthur attempts to explain and stops, unable to articulate.

“Things might have changed since you were last there,” I suggest.

“No, that’s not it. I had the eerie feeling that things were slightly out of place even when all the houses appeared built in the Dutch style. I dismissed it as a subjective perception till I saw a house which was most definitely American,” he tells me.

I look at him with a questioning gaze.

“American?” I ask.

“Yes, the house was American or North American, but certainly not Dutch. And I felt like I knew the house,” he tells me and stops, struggling to continue.

“Tell me about it,” I prod him.

"I entered that house, and I figured it was your house. You lived there as a kid," he sighs.

"Me?!" I exclaim.

"Yes, but it wasn't this you, it was another you, living in another life," he tells me.

I start to understand.

"Where was the house?" I want to know.

"In Boulder," he says.

"How can you be sure the house was in Boulder?" I want to know.

"I was your father's friend, and I had gone to your place to see him. At a point in our conversation he said, 'Boulder is a neat place, but it can get boring', and that's why I am sure I was in Boulder" he explains.

"Did you see me?" I need to know, and I shiver as I wait for his answer.

He nods.

"And?"

"And you started playing grownup with me," he tells me, without looking at me.

"You mean..." I start.

"You took my hand and told me things I would have preferred not to hear," Arthur says.

"Ok Arthur, why don't you tell me the whole story?" I snap, impatient.

"You took my hand and you started to flirt with me when all of a sudden the ceiling of your room cracked," Arthur continues, raising his eyes and steadying his voice.

"Another crack...and what did you see?" I ask.

"Beyond the ceiling there was a room shaped just like yours and yet furnished in a completely different manner. You were up there, and you were an adult. You looked down through the crack, but you didn't see me. There was a man in the room, I sensed that his presence made you uncomfortable. He told you that your life would change forever if you jumped in the room where I was," Arthur says.

"I remember...so it wasn't a dream..." I whisper.

"I don't know anymore," Arthur replies.

"I ignored the man's words and jumped down..." I say.

"No you didn't, not right away at least" Arthur replies.

"Yes I did," I insist.

"No, I'm the one who climbed up" Arthur objects.

"So what happened to young Iris who was with you in the room?" I want to know.

"I...I left her behind," Arthur fumbles, dropping his head.

"You left little Iris behind?!" I exclaim incredulous.

"Well, I wanted to go up first and then bring her with me, but-" he starts.

"But?" I urge him, grabbing his arms.

"But when I looked down little Iris had become a boy," Arthur says at last.

### **Chapter 33**

"I...I had become a boy?" I whisper.

Arthur nods.

"You know, I had a dream about my father telling me that I carry my brother within me. I didn't understand his meaning...but now...who am I?" I say, talking to myself.

"You are Iris, and you are a woman," Arthur replies.

I shake my head no, and I feel tears pooling in my eyes.

"Why are you crying?" Arthur asks.

I cannot get myself to answer.

"You haven't heard the end of the story," Arthur objects.

I look at him expectantly, hoping for a new turn.

"When I leaped to the room on top you saw me, and stopped short for a moment. Then you looked down, and it was then that you saw the little boy. He saw you too, and gripped you with his pleading eyes. His eyes resembled yours and yet they didn't, they were defenseless, and with their lost expression they sought comfort in your determined gaze. The man beside you told you, "If you jump down, your life will change forever." And as soon as he said so, you jumped," Arthur tells me.

"What happened next?"

"You became the little girl I left in the old room before exploring the parallel world above," Arthur says.

"I did?" I ask, relieved.

“Yes, you did. You took your brother’s hand and looked at the man in defiance. “My life will change forever, and so will yours,” you told him. When I called your name your eyes filled with sadness for an instant, but then you smiled and said we’d meet again,” Arthur says.

“And I was right,” I reply, smiling.

“I didn’t have the time to answer you because the man grabbed my wrists, and pulled me away from the crack. I tried to break free, but his hands clamped my wrists as if they were made of steel and he dragged me to a room I hadn’t noticed. In a corner, on the floor, there was a trap-door and he pushed me down with a strength that was unhuman. It was dark inside. I thought he’d dump me in there and lock the door, but instead he stepped in, and closed the door behind us. There was no light at all, and I don’t know how he managed to lead me down the stairs as I kept stumbling and falling. After walking downwards for an indefinite amount of time we reached a level,” Arthur remembers.

He pauses and shakes his head for a moment, as if attempting to clear his mind.

“What is it, Arthur?” I ask.

“He called Ludwig’s name, and your unde appeared,” he continues.

“My uncle...I dreamed about that too. Uncle Ludwig...” I whisper.

“It’s not a dream, Iris,” Arthur tells me.

I am about to ask a question, but he raises his finger.

“Wait, let me finish. I don’t understand the whole picture, but I am starting to see a pattern. So Ludwig appeared, carrying a torch, and a dim light spread in the room. We were in a library. Do you remember the library?” Arthur asks me.

“Which library? The one we reached from the cemetery?” I ask.

“Exactly. See, if it was nothing but a dream we couldn’t have the same memories,” Arthur reasons.

“You’re right...” I nod slowly, trying to make sense of what is happening.

“Ludwig told me, ‘You’re here to re-write the book.’ I couldn’t understand his meaning, and I sat silent. ‘I was born second, after the king, and that was utterly unjust,’ Ludwig continued. I shrugged, and he smiled bitterly at my indifference. ‘I studied ways to defy the destiny,’ he went on, and the man who dragged me there nodded, then looked at me and added, ‘You spoiled it all, but now you’ll correct the damage you’ve made.’ I asked what damage they referred to. Ludwig shook his head, as if he could not conceive my forgetfulness. The man beside me had momentarily released his grip, but suddenly he pushed me down on a chair. Ludwig placed in front of me the book we’ve been after all this time. ‘Now it’s the time to read it,’ Ludwig told me, ‘And to change it.’ He opened it and, at the same time, the man laid his hands on my skull. I felt a shock run through my whole body, and convulsed, and suddenly I found myself in front your naked body, holding a surgical scalpel in my hand,” Arthur tells me.

## Chapter 34

I picture the scalpel slicing my skin and instinctively press my hands tight against my stomach.

"I am so sorry Iris," Arthur tells me, his eyes filled with sorrow.

I shake my head without speaking and crawl backwards, my hands still pressed against my stomach.

"They gave us no choice," Arthur defends himself.

When I am at a safe distance I stop for a moment and slowly pull up my shirt to look at a mark I had since my birth, a long thin line running from my pubis all the way up to my breasts.

"What did you do to me?" I manage to whisper.

I feel betrayed, lost, and infinitely lonely.

"Your unde was holding a knife against your throat. I remember each of his words. 'Now, if you don't want her dead you will have to separate Iris from her brother,' he told me. When I asked what he intended to do with your brother he pointed at an ampoule lying on a table. It contained a dark embryo, floating in a black fluid. Your mother was tied on a chair beside it, and stared at Ludwig with hatred. 'We should have destroyed you and your creation, Ludwig,' she said gelidly. Your uncle laughed. 'We didn't because we are not criminals, but that was a mistake,' she continued. 'But you *did* kill me, he objected. 'No, we did not kill you. We trapped the venomous seed you wanted to become your successor in an indeterminate state and didn't allow it to develop for a second time. We could not afford having a second Ludwig in this world,' I replied. 'Is it so, doctor? Well, now you will take Iris's brother out of her and place it in the same ampoule where the embryo of my future self is now.' I stood there, frozen with the scalpel in my hand. 'Now, have a look at that corner,' Ludwig continued, and I saw the queen, lying in bed, eyes closed. 'My successor should go back to where it belongs, and you are going to return it to the womb from which you treacherously eradicated it and stole it,' he told me. I stood there, frozen. 'Let's not waste any more time, get started with Iris, doctor', he urged me. You understand we had no choice?" Arthur pleads.

"And so you took my brother away from me. *You* did it. Why do you say that *we* had no choice?" I ask.

"I saw no way out. I took the scalpel and brought it to my throat, and said I would rather die than do what he wanted me to do," Arthur tells me.

I want to trust Arthur, but a part of me can't.

"I was ready to slice my throat when your mother stopped me. 'Don't. Give me the scalpel, I'll do it,' she said. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Ludwig turned pale. 'I know you want to trick me, but I won't let you,' he said with an unsteady voice. She calmly replied that she couldn't trick him since he was holding a knife on her daughter's throat. Then she stood up," Arthur continues.

"But you said she was tied," I object.

“She was. When I say that she stood up, I mean a part of her did. Her shadow, her soul, I don’t have good enough words to describe what I saw. She left her body behind, tied on the chair. It looked inanimate, the head was tilted, the eyes closed. Her shadow came close to me and said, ‘Give me the scalpel.’ Ludwig stood there, mouth ajar, frozen. I was frozen too, so she took my hand and guided it to cut you open. Then she laid her hands on your open wound, and started to sing a soft, buzzing rhythm, an ancient lullaby. Filaments of smoke began to flow from your body, and the shape of a young man formed – your brother. She took the scalpel from my hands, and heading towards the body she left behind she sliced it open. Your brother looked around with a lost gaze, but when she pointed at the cut on her unconscious body he walked towards it with obedient steps. When he was at a close distance the air blurred around him, and a vortex formed. Then he suddenly disappeared, sucked into your mother’s womb. An instant later the wound on your mother’s body and yours healed, leaving behind a fine line that ran from the pubis to your breasts. Ludwig had been looking at a spot inside your open cut before it closed, standing immobile, his eyes frightened,” Arthur recalls.

“Why frightened?” I want to know.

“Because a part of him too was inside you,” Arthur says.

I drop silent for a moment.

“Is he inside me now?” I ask.

“I think so, but not all of him. Just enough for you to control his life and death, and to remember,” he tells me enigmatically.

“But will I always have to carry him inside me? And what happened to my brother?” I insist.

I feel nauseous.

“I think many of the answers are in the fragments of the space ship I was discovering with you, your brother, Matt and-” Arthur starts, but before he can finish we feel the room move upwards.

“What is happening?” I scream.

“I don’t know!” Arthur screams back, as the walls of the room turn into steel, and shrink, and melt into a new shape, and we find ourselves into an elevator.

A luminous arrow points downwards, but we sense the elevator move up, up, up, its speed increasing till we are propelled upwards at a speed that deafens my ears, blurs my vision, drains the blood from my arms.

I want to call Arthur’s name, but my voice dies away into a sea of black dots.

## **Chapter 35**

Outside is a sea of blackness punctuated by bright dots, stars, planets, galaxies, light years away. The space where I am sitting is white.

Alone in this outpost, I feel energized and empowered by the boundless possibilities lying before me. The view is foreign and familiar at once.

I've been here before, this used to be home, or something I could almost call home. I stand up and approach the window. From this new angle I notice there's a ship secured to the walls of the station.

It's my ship.

It's the ship I had seen myself rediscovering with my brother and Arthur in a long gone time.

For how long have I been alone in the empty space? How did I readjust to other humans after this isolation, exhilarating and crushing at once?

As I ask myself these questions I press a button, instinctively, without knowing why.

*"Arthur will answer the call in 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 seconds. You will speak to Arthur in 0 seconds,"* a female voice clearly enunciates, and Arthur's face appears on the window. His room, as white as mine, is an oxymoron against the infinite blackness of space.

"Why did you not call me earlier?" he asks.

"Because I just got here...I don't fully remember, or know..." I begin to fumble.

"Do you want to see me? There's something I must show you," he tells me.

"Yes, I do want to see you. I really do," I say, meaning every word, and Arthur steps out of the image.

"It's this easy?" I ask, laughing and crying at once.

Arthur observes me inquisitively.

"Are you feeling fine?" he asks.

I wonder if he recalls nothing of what happened to me, to us. The question burns on my lips, but I wipe the tears away and smile.

"I'm fine. What did you want to show me?" I ask.

"I happened to tune on a frequency shifted by 3.2 eons from our current frequency, and I found something that puzzled me. It seems to concern us. I'd call it a clever prank if only I didn't have the feeling that it's actually true," Arthur starts and pauses.

"Come on Arthur, don't play the mystery man," I reply impatiently.

"Ok," he says, producing a pin-sized device from his pocket.

He places it on the bench and says, "Frequency 'o', 3 dot 2 dot shift dot eon dot local."

The light of the room dims, and the iced whiteness of the walls turns into a mellow cream colour, and an instant later the room is populated by a scenery of the past. My past. Our past.

I see myself holding a flag dominated by an owl, surly, huge, his long claws tight on a book I remember seeing.

Arthur is beside me, and Matt and Wilhelm, and a crew of no more than a hundred soldiers, some mounted, some on foot.

A cloud of dust materializes from a far-away distance, and I wait.

I am not afraid but tense, knowing I should not trust who will meet the other Iris I am seeing. I'd want to ask the other Iris what is happening, and for an instant she seems to sense my presence and looks up at the sky.

The cloud thickens, becomes larger, and at last I see the face of the enemy. I smile carelessly before recomposing my face into an expressionless mask.

Ludwig is carrying a flag dominated by two swords, larger than my owl, crossed over a book sliced in half.

Beside him is the queen, the woman who once married my father the king and who was never my mother.

Behind them is an army of no less than a thousand soldiers, all mounted.

### **Chapter 36**

Iris scrutinizes Ludwig for a long moment, before shifting my attention to the queen.

"My father the king sends you his respects," she tell her, my mouth bitter with hatred.

The queen's face turns pale.

"My mother the queen belongs to where she stands now," Ludwig retorts.

"She doubtlessly does. You've got your rewards at last, it seems," Iris says ironically.

"Not all of them," Ludwig replies.

"I'm here to set the terms, not to obey" Iris hears herself state.

"You will come with me and return the last thing that belongs to me," Ludwig says.

"What would that be?" Iris asks, although she know.

Ludwig sighs, as if making a huge effort to remain patient.



“Either you follow me spontaneously, or I will take you against your will. Either way, you will come with me and return what belongs to me,” he says calmly.

Arthur brings his hand to the sword, and I sense his gest reflected in the body language of our soldiers. I no longer know if I am witnessing the scene or living it.

“This was not the deal,” Iris replies.

“This is the deal now,” Ludwig says.

“If you hurt me, you will hurt yourself. And if you kill me, you’ll die,” Iris states, coolly.

Sitting in my spaceship light years away from Earth, I observe myself having a conversation I don’t fully understand, in a time from which I’ve departed.

“I never said I wanted to hurt or kill you. At least for now,” Ludwig grins.

“I am saying it,” I intervene, and now it’s really me talking, Iris in the spaceship looking at the projection of me reverberating from the channel at frequency ‘o’, 3 dot 2 dot shift dot eon dot local.

Everyone freezes, including the other me.

“No, Iris,” the two Arthurs say in unison.

“No, Iris,” Ludwig echoes.

It’s too late though, because I’ve triggered something in that other me and now the sword that hung from my belt is pressing against my throat, as my hand holds it defiantly. I am filled with hatred for everything, including myself, in this spaceship and in that other time. My vision blurs, I cannot care if I die.

“Don’t,” repeats Ludwig, but that’s a mistake, because the fear in his voice only galvanizes my anger.

“Don’t,” Arthur repeats, and his pleading tone flexes my determination for the briefest moment, before the blade sinks into my flesh and the life seeps out of my neck in crimson gushes.

I am one with the other me now, and when she falls from the horse, holding the wound she inflicted to herself, I drop on the floor too, moaning.

“Iris,” I hear in duplicate, the incredulous despair echoing from the two Arthurs.

I attempt one last smile, refusing to yield to death till blackness dawns on the colours of my day.

## **Chapter 37**

“Iris...what have you done? Drink...drink...drink,” I hear, the words propagate through my muffled senses.

It's my mother's voice.

The sour tasting fluid diffuses within me, reviving my agonizing body.

"If I had not been there disguised as a soldier's you would have died. Why, Iris?" my mother asks me, without expecting an answer.

I cannot see or speak, but I can hear her words.

"Drink," she repeats, pouring a second fluid in my mouth, bitter with just a tinge of sweetness, and I open my eyes.

"Is Ludwig alive?" I ask when I manage to speak.

"He is. If you die the royal family will have no future, regardless of Ludwig's fate. Are you aware of this?" my mother says, her tone reproachful and worried at once.

I shake my head no, lying.

"Yes you are," she says.

"Is Ludwig alive?" I insist, ignoring her admonitions.

"Yes he is," my mother confirms.

I want to hit my womb to destroy all it holds, even if that means my own death. I raise my hand, ready to strike, but my mother grabs my wrist, looking at me sternly.

"You are to listen to me very carefully, Iris," she tells me.

Immobile, I look at her.

"Tell me the truth," I reply.

"Ludwig always resented being second born," she starts, and I nod.

"He decided that he deserved a better destiny, and devised a way to create a copy of himself who – he hoped – would achieve the status of leader. That copy is the man you saw today," she tells me.

"How did Ludwig duplicate himself?" I want to know.

"You once met a man in Boulder CO. He told you not to jump through a crack in a room that felt familiar and yet unknown. Do you remember?" she asks me.

All I remember are flecks of a dream, or perhaps even not flecks, just the feeling they left behind.

"Vaguely," I tell her.

“That man didn’t want you to come back to change the course of things. If you hadn’t, Ludwig would be the king now. We all counted on you, Iris, and you didn’t disappoint us,” she tells me.

I feel a huge burden on me.

“What does that man have to do with Ludwig?” I want to know.

“He’s the one who created Ludwig’s copy,” she explains.

“So why did he not prevent me from doing what would change the course of things?” I ask.

“He couldn’t. Once your decision was made he could not stop you. Even if he had prevented that specific action in Boulder you would have pursued the plan in other ways,” my mother tells me.

“But I had no plan,” I object.

“You did, although you were not consciously aware of it,” my mother corrects me.

I struggle to decipher my mother’s meaning. Surrendering, I decide to divert the subject.

“And the mother of this new Ludwig is the queen,” I say.

“Your father the king was married to the queen, but she was never loyal to your family. Ludwig had chosen her to be his mother, to foster the enemy within the very womb of the royal family. If Ludwig’s plan had worked your brother would have been an identical copy of your uncle, shifted in time,” she tells me.

“And how come uncle’s plan failed?” I want to know.

“Why do you ask? You must know the answer already. Ludwig was extracted from the queen’s womb, and his embryo was stored in a place where I thought it would not be found,” she tells me.

“Not within me?” I ask, sitting up, lit by the sudden hope that I am not carrying the vermin within me.

“Only a small fragment of him is inside you. That fragment allows you to control his life and death, and ensures that he cannot kill you without killing himself,” my mother says.

I let myself drop back on the bed, defeated.

“Wait, let me finish the story,” says my mother, gripping my wrists.

“The woman who married your father was a clone, you know?” she continues.

“What?!” I exclaim.

My mother nods.

“Yes, the original seed of the queen was raised in a faraway place, in a country of ferocious invaders, the same barbarians who have been menacing the future of the royal family. The future descendants of this

nation created the clone and ensured that it got married to your father, to destabilize the royal family," my mother explains.

"How do you know this, mother?" I ask her.

"I've lived longer than you have, my child," she replies, smiling sadly.

"And so the man I've seen today is the son of the barbarian queen?" I ask.

My mother nods.

I pause for a moment, and then say, "I no longer want to have any part of Ludwig within me, whatever the consequences."

"I've realized this today," my mother tells me.

I wait for her to continue.

"I will give you a potion that will expel the last fragment of Ludwig from you. But beware! Once you'll drink it your life will be in jeopardy, and so will the fate of the royal family," she warns me.

I nod my understanding.

"Once you'll exhale Ludwig's last fragment I will store it in a bottle, in a numbing solution. I pray the gods that Ludwig will not find it", my mother tells me.

I nod again.

"But prayers are not good enough. The seed must be destroyed," she says.

I want Ludwig dead, and yet I gasp.

"The facts have proved that there is no other alternative," my mother states coolly.

"Then why store the seed in a bottle? Why not destroy it now?" I want to know.

"Because only you can destroy it," she tells me, enunciating the words slowly as their weight sinks within me.

"Me?" I fumble.

"Yes, you, and you alone," she confirms.

I drop silent.

"But you cannot do so now. You must first find the door and open it, and learn all the answers it conceals," she says, before bringing a flask to my mouth, and pouring the potion down my throat before I can speak another word.

The potion creeps inside me in fingers of pain, excruciating, twisting my womb, and I scream as I've never screamed before.

And yet, before I black out, an infinite and liberating happiness elates within me.

I am finally free.

### **Chapter 38**

"What is happening, Iris?" I hear, as the warmth of a familiar embrace wraps around me.

I ball up, holding my abdomen, shattered by a pain so lacerating I cannot reply.

"Iris," I hear again.

The pain relents, without fully subsiding.

"Are you ok?" Arthur asks me.

"Not really," I mumble.

"What is happening?" he asks again.

"Ludwig is finally out of me," I say.

Arthur's lack of understanding translates into a moment of silence.

"My mother took him out of me, finally," I continue.

"Are you in pain?" Arthur asks, caressing my forehead.

"Freedom isn't painless, you know?" I reply, laughing bitterly.

Then, turning serious, I say, slowly, "I will kill him".

"How?" Arthur asks.

"My mother told me that the door is the way to his death," I tell him enigmatically.

Arthur waits for me to continue.

"My mother told me that I cannot find a way to rid myself and my family of Ludwig unless I find the door. I don't know why, and I don't even know which door I have to find, let alone where to find it. Or maybe I do...deep down I think I know, but I still have to retrieve the answers within me. I don't have them now," I say, speaking rapidly, talking to myself more than to Arthur.

I've just finished speaking when I hear a loud thump, and only now I realize that we are still in the same elevator in which I lost conscience. We're still in Mine 503, ascending from the room in which Arthur

walked out of a movie in which he, my brother, and I were starring. I remember we were digging out remnants of a space ship that used to be mine.

Dream or reality?

I am no longer sure that we are truly in an old, jerky, elevator in Mine 503, which just stopped with a loud thump.

“Arthur, where are we?” I ask, needing confirmations.

“We are still in the mine, I suppose,” he says, without much assurance in his voice.

“At least we agree on our supposition,” I smile, shrugging.

Suddenly the elevator door opens. Arthur offers me his hand, pulls me up and we step into a room with no windows and no doors.

We look around, inspecting the bare walls, the barren space.

There’s nothing for us here.

“We need to go back,” I say, trying to keep my voice steady.

Arthur shakes his head no. I turn towards the spot where the elevator was and I find it’s gone.

“Oh, I see the problem,” I sigh.

We stand in the middle of the room, with no doors to escape from.

“I must find the door to kill Ludwig,” I state abruptly.

As soon I make the statement, four doors materialize on the four walls of the room. They seem painted on the walls.

I observe them, skeptical, suddenly defiant.

The doors open, and the sketch of a man looking like a joker appears at the bench of each of them. They laugh a fake laughter.

*Which door, door, door, door?*, the room echoes.

I look around, and my head starts to spin.

*Which door, door, door, door?*, the room echoes once more.

“This is not true,” I state, looking at Arthur, but he’s just as lost as I am.

“Which door should we try?” I ask him, even if I know I won’t get an answer.

Arthur rolls his gaze around, as the laughter bounces in the room, the trails of noise knitting a spider web around us.

The doors multiply and the disorienting sounds spins around us till my head pounds so hard I cannot think.

*Which door, door?* a hundred jokers ask me, sneering at my impotence.

I close my eyes, and the space ceases to spin.

The sounds are still out there, but in the darkness of my closed eyelids I find a slit of quiet. I bend, and feeling my way around I start to explore the room.

I used my eyes and ears, and they failed me. I have five senses though.

With my eyes closed, I realize the room has the wet smell of a dungeon after a prolonged thunderstorm. I touch the floor, sense its texture with my fingers. It's smooth, exceptionally smooth.

I rub my finger against the floor, and lick it. The taste is bitter, medicinal. It's the taste of a potion. The term darts through me, *potion*.

I am suddenly aware that, once upon a time, I knew how to make potions. Yes, I used to prepare the potions in a dungeon.

Crawling, I reach a corner. Eyes closed, I follow its edge, slowly, wondering if I got here for a reason.

The room turns quiet.

Leaning my hand on the floor, I discover the presence of a sharp object. It cuts through my flesh, and when I bring my hand to my mouth I taste the blood.

Instead of opening my eyes to inspect the wound I grab the object, and start working on the corner. I want to cut it open.

I start gently, working my way inside the wall with caution. When I sense the wall is starting to crack I hasten the pace of my work. I hammer the wall with the sharp object, as the blood dribbles down my wrists. I pound and pound, till my arms can no longer stand the beat.

Exhaustion is about to knock me down when I feel two hands wrap mine around the handle of the tool I have been holding.

They raise it for me, and knock it against the wall, once more. I feel the wall break.

Eyes closed, I touch the crack propagating noiselessly into the silent room.

I open my eyes, and I see Arthur's hands on mine, a scalpel raised onto a propagating crack beyond which is a world unexplored and yet oddly familiar.

We look at each other and nod, smiling.

"Well done, partner," I say.

### **Chapter 39**

When we step inside the crack the air is cold and humid. There a soft gurgling sound emanating from a corner.

There, standing quietly side by side, Arthur and I are intent in the preparation of a yellowish fluid, bubbling inside an ampoule. Our clothing are outdated and elegant. In which time have we landed? This must be the dungeon of the castle.

Our alter egos don't notice us for a while. Then the other me senses my presence and turns. She bugs her eyes, staring at me for a long moment, till the tension in her gaze captures the attention of the other Arthur.

He's about to say something, but she touches his elbow slightly, playfully, and places a finger on her mouth.

"Shh," she hushes him.

"But..." he starts.

"We need to complete this task," she says.

I take Arthur by the hand, motioning towards our alter egos. We walk towards them, without speaking a word.

"Yes, we do. We don't have much time, and sooner or later someone will find us even if we are hiding down here," the other Arthur agrees.

"We need to boil the potion for a while longer before adding the last ingredient," my alter ego replies.

"And we have to verify if it has the effect we expect it to have," Arthur adds.

Who just spoke is not Arthur's alter ego, but the Arthur beside me, holding my hand.

"It will work, I know it," his alter ego responds to this comment.

"What do we expect it to do?" I ask, breaching the silence, looking at the other me and the two Arthurs.

"This potion reveals people's identity," my alter ego explains, slowly enunciating the concept.

"What do you want to do with it?" I ask.



"Drink it," she replies calmly.

#### **Chapter 40**

"Why do you want to drink the potion? Why do you want your identity revealed, and to whom?" I want to know.

"To myself, to you," my alter ego tells me.

I narrow my eyes, struggling to understand.

"You need to find the door, remember?" she says.

"Yes, but-" I start.

"What's your plan for finding it?" she interrupts me.

"Well, I...I don't really have a well-defined plan," I fumble.

"If you don't have a plan, how do you expect to ever find it?" she challenges me.

"Do *you* have a plan?" I defiantly ask the other me.

"Not now, and that's why I want to drink this potion," she replies with flawless logic.

"You need to know who you really are to find the door", I say, my question phrased as a statement.

"In a sense. We don't know what behind the door, but we know that whatever it is, it will save the kingdom," my alter ego explains.

"How do you know?" I inquire.

"There is an ancient book, which father inherited from our ancestors. Grandfather forbade him from reading it till an exceptional circumstance arose," my alter ego says.

"Which exceptional circumstance?" I want to know.

"Father would recognize the exceptional circumstance when it happened, grandfather said. The book was stored in a safe, and nobody but father knew the code to open it. One night father sought refuge in the library to clear his mind. He noticed the book on the library's table, right in front of the chair where he usually sat, and he knew the time had come," she recollects.

Now her head is bowed as she speaks, as if she was recounting these memories to herself.

"And what did the book say about the door?" I ask.

"Right, what did it say? That is a question I cannot fully answer. It said that behind the door lies the way to the eternal life of our father's kingdom. The rest is undefined," she replies enigmatically.

"Undefined? How so?" I insist.

"Depending on the reader, the words of the book change," she tells me.

## **Chapter 41**

"The words change depending on the reader" I echo.

"They do," my alter ego confirms.

"But then I don't understand...why are you drinking the potion to understand who you are? What you read in the book might be deceiving," I argue.

"I am not the only one who will drink the potion. I want my whole crew to do the same," she tells me.

"Your whole crew?" I ask in confusion.

"The crew I will lead in the expedition to find the door," my alter ego replies.

"Don't be so cryptic, Iris," I frown.

"Don't be so un-intuitive, Iris," she retorts.

"You can view all the readers as lenses looking at the same object from different angles, each distorting it in some way. If you know in which ways each lens distorts your image, and which side of the image it captures, you might be able to build a somewhat objective and complete representation of the image," she tells me.

I start to fathom her plan, and I nod.

"I see, you want to capture the real meaning of the book through the million different interpretations of your readers. In practice though-" I start, but before I can complete my sentence she lifts the ampoule to her lips.

"Get ready, Iris," she warns me, a split second before the liquid pours down her throat.

As she intakes the potion, I feel it seep through me, expanding slowly within my veins.

"Wait," I shriek, panicking, but I can no longer stop my alter ego.

The potion sends waves of heat through me. I feel my body swell to a humongous size, while my head stays small. My body tilts, slowly, as if gravity had no effect on it and I find myself floating along the ceiling in a horizontal position.

I am weightless, and the space seems oddly similar and yet not fully recognizable.

Then I stiffen, and it seems like I can no longer move myself without shattering the whole space with my huge, dense, heavy self.

I drop to the floor, dragged by my own weight.

For a short moment following the fall I seem to be back to my regular size.

"Iris," I hear.

For reasons I cannot ascertain I start laughing.

"Iris," I hear again, my name resounding in anguished notes.

I cannot see who is speaking to me, and I cannot see the place. The outside world has blacked out, and I am dizzy.

And yet a second later my mind clears.

I am walking alone, but I don't feel lonely.

The space outside me is dark, but I feel like I know where to step.

I am in a forest, I sense the leaves brush against me, and the branches rip my clothing and graze my face.

None of this matters though.

The road is rough, but I know that at its end I will find what I am looking for.

And soon enough, a faint glow starts pulsing before me.

## **Chapter 42**

I move towards the pulsing light, attempting to ascertain its origin. From a close distance the light ceases to appear intermittent, and I find myself enveloped by its suffused halo, soft and immobile in the night.

The space around me remains dark, but at the center of the sphere of light in which I stand there is an old map, marked by time and crippled along the edges, and yet clearly legible.

"You are here," reads a label, pointing at a flame.

From it a dashed line snakes along a large dark patch, labelled "The woods."

As my eyes follow the line I am lead to a cryptic image, which could represent a cave.

"Your army is here," it reads.

I wonder how far that point is from where I am now. There's only one trail marked on the map so - no matter the distance - if I keep walking there is no doubt that I will reach "my army".

I have a vague recollection of an army, but I can no longer tell if it was a dream, a memory, or something I read and made mine.

The line doesn't stop at the cave and the army. It moves further, beyond what seems to be a mountainous land, all the way to a cross.

"The cemetery," the map says, and beside the label there's an arrow pointing at a region located at some depth below the surface. "The inevitable depths," the arrow indicates.

I feel a shiver as I read the omate writing. The line does not interrupt itself there though. There is a way out of these depths.

"The book trail," reads a label along the line exiting them.

The line zig-zags through what seems an empty space, and points to a cirde called, "The Galaxian archeological site," adjacent to a circle denominated "The Future Galaxies."

From it the line continues.

"The Book trail," it repeats.

I follow it further, and it says, "Mine 503."

I think I remember all this, have I not seen it already?

My frenzy finger traces the profile of the line, and beyond Mine 503 there is a convoluted labyrinth.

But is it a labyrinth?

I bring my face closer to the map, and I realize that what I am seeing is not a labyrinth, but a game of mirrors bouncing a million reflections of my own face, or rather its appearance, distorted and twisted. I resemble unde Ludwig at one moment, my brother Tristan the next instant, and a second later the person I think I am.

I pull back, terrified.

"You must learn to know yourself, my child," I hear my mother say.

"Mother!" I call out.

Silence.

"Mother?" I call out again, but to no avail.

I start to wonder if I am hallucinating.

My eyes move along the line, blurred by the tears pooling in my eyes.

My courage is fading away, my assurance vacillates.

"The potion of the Truth," reads a flag.

I remember the potion too. I feel like I've lived all this before, as if I stepped in each and every destination of the map in a long gone time.

"Yes you have," a voice thunders, in reply to my unspoken thoughts.

I look around, startled.

"Who are you?" I ask.

"This is your map, Iris," it resounds again.

"But if I am here-" I start, and my voice breaks.

"Phrase your question adequately, if you want an answer," the voice tells me.

"If I am here," I say, gathering my courage as I point at a spot on the map, "Where am I to go to find the door?"

"What is the door, Iris?" the voice asks.

"Freedom!" I shout, surprising myself.

I start to run as I've never run before, against the night, away from the voice which echoes behind me, "Are you sure? Are you, Iris? Sure? Are you sure? I am asking, are you really sure?"

The night is behind me, beyond me, and the present is dark.

But the voice won't have me.

I run and run, determined to continue till the moment I will collapse. There's nothing to lose, since there's no place for me to go and there will never be.

And yet before I collapse I hit something huge, solid as steel, cold as the blackness around it. I collide against it at full speed, and fall down, suddenly awakened by the impact.

I just found the door.

### **Chapter 43**

There's a lock on the door, it's massive, solid, and as intimidating as the door it seals. I can't really see it, but I sense it, feeling the door with my hands.

I pound against it, and a hollow echo reverberates against me, propagates within me, and plows its way out of me in the form of a scream.

I barely recognize my voice. I barely recognize myself.

And all of a sudden I outside myself and I see a person called Iris pound on a door and scream.

“What advice would you give to someone who is plunged in darkness and pounds against a door that refuses to crack open?” I ask her.

I see her pause, gaining conscience.

“I would tell the person to try and find some light and some tools,” she replies.

“How?” I prod her.

“One could sleep and wait for it to dawn,” she replies.

“So you assume that it will dawn. What if it won’t? How can you decide how long you must wait before assessing that it will never dawn?” I insist.

I sense Iris’s discomfort.

“I can’t understand what’s out here, blindly,” she defends herself.

“You can get an impression of the surroundings by feeling the terrain with your hands, even if the night is blinding you,” I propose encouragingly.

“Yes,” she says, and yet she is reluctant to move.

“Come on, you must do it,” I urge her.

Slowly, she starts to crawl, feeling her way through the unknown.

“Tell me, what are you touching, Iris?” I ask.

“Something cold,” she replies.

“Is it rough or smooth?”

“I don’t know,” she says.

I know she’s holding back the tears.

“Ok Iris, why don’t you tell me a story?” I say.

“A story?” she echoes, confused.

“Let me begin. She started touching the ground around her. It was black, cold, and undefinable. She felt defeated, she couldn’t believe she’d find anything. She wasn’t sure she’d survive, let alone survive and open the door. It wasn’t fear she felt, or at least not only fear. What caused tears to pool in her eyes was rather the disappointment of failing miserably after having been a promising heir. What she hadn’t done though, was *dig* into that black, cold, surface,” I start.

Iris stops, the shift in her mood is slight and yet perceptible. There is a moment of silence.

“The thought occurred to her in a flashing second, it gave her hope,” I continue, and I hear a gentle shuffle, the sound thin hands make when they dig through loose soil.

“You wouldn’t logically expect to find a source of light *under* the earth. But if you are perfectly logical all the time you can’t make any discoveries, can you? If you are perfectly logical all the time it means you are not creative,” I persist, not really knowing where this will lead.

That’s no matter though. The point is not to find an immediate solution, but to keep alive the will to try, beyond all reasonable hope.

“Right,” I insist, and Iris digs.

“If one spot doesn’t work, there’s always a chance that the adjacent one will,” I prod her.

When I myself start to wonder if I have gone fully insane, Iris shrieks “Oh God!”

She felt a foot as she dug, and a leg, and a whole body.

“Keep going!” I urge her, my skin covered in goose bumps, because it’s cold and my pretense cannot efface my fears.

Iris digs.

“What is this!” she screams, as another foot, leg, a full body emerges from the cold earth.

“Dig Iris, dig. Do not stop. All you have to do is dig,” I state, and she keeps digging.

As she scoops of handful of soil after the next, an army of bodies finds its way out of the blackness.

I’m exhausted, Iris is exhausted. Our throat is dry, our bodies limp, our minds vacillate in the indetermination of the endless night.

We are about to let go, I sense it, but we haven’t yet.

“Where do you think we are, Iris?” I ask, making a super-human effort.

“In the cemetery” she tells me.

“Are these men dead?” I want to know.

“No, we aren’t”, a choir of voices echoes, and we start.

“We aren’t, Iris. The past is never over. We are you loyal army, don’t you remember us?” they ask her, me, us.

And Iris and I become one again.

## **Chapter 44**

“Yes, I do remember you...” I whisper.

The voices turn into mist, and the mist rises slowly, shedding an eerie glow in the night. I observe it, mesmerized.

“Uhuhuhuh” the earth resonates, almost inaudibly at first and then louder and louder.

“What is happening?” I ask nobody in particular, a moment before the mist breaks into a flash of light and the humming sound spoken by the earth goes quiet.

And the army appears.

Each man mounts a horse and each carries a torch, breaching the darkness with a cone of light.

“We are here, at your service,” the army voice in unison, and goes silent.

“And this is your horse,” says Arthur against the sudden wall of silence, standing in the front row, sided by Matt and Wilhelm.

I step forward and jump on the horse, nodding my gratefulness.

“Thank you, soldiers,” I begin, my voice propagating in the night, suddenly powerful and crisp.

“God bless our future queen,” they echo.

“Soldiers, friends, together we will open the door to the eternal life of the kingdom. Let me lead you there,” I announce.

Was I the one who just spoke? Was I ever meant to be a leader of men? I thought I’d never cared to be one.

I have just convinced myself that I can play the role, when Arthur approaches me.

“Iris, have a look around you, what do you see?” he asks me, shaking me out of the glorious moment.

“The cemetery,” I reply, looking around and suddenly remembering.

“And do you recollect the time when we were here?” he continues.

I do. We had found our way to the library where the book was, and the entry to the library was one of the tombs. I observe them, trying to recall which grave lead us there.

“You’ll sense which one is right, just focus,” Arthur tells me, reading my unspoken question.

“Don’t you think we can at least try to open the door without the book? Let’s go there and see how it looks like, just to get an idea of what we need to open it,” I propose, although I have no faith in my own words.



“What do we need to do with the book Iris? Tell me, why do we need it?” Arthur asks, his eyes locked onto mine.

“We need the book to understand how to open the door,” I reply, as if reciting obediently.

“Yes. But to use the book you have to remember how to read the information it contains,” Arthur continues.

I nod, without taking my eyes off his, before dismounting my horse.

“Of course I will remember,” I answer, my tone challenging.

I scan the graves, till a tomb attracts my attention. It seems odd, although I cannot ascertain the origin of my perception.

As I look at this tomb the eyes of my army stare at me in unison.

I move towards it, and the lid slides away seamlessly.

Each soldier dismounts, without the need of my command. Then they stand and wait.

I stand and wait too, embracing my army with a long gaze. The soldiers nod at me, and in that nod I feel warmth and faith.

“Let’s go,” I decide, meaning to add some words of encouragement, but not having the time to. Before I can utter another syllable we are all drawn in dark meanders, swallowed by the grave.

## **Chapter 45**

The air is cold and humid and there a rustling sound emanating from a corner. The place looks like the dungeon of a castle. The atmosphere seems somewhat familiar, although I cannot place it.

My army, behind me, is waiting for me to define the next move. The men are no longer on their horses, and there’s a hint of fear on their faces.

I look around, trying to find some inspiration for the next move, and in a corner I see an array of ampoules, neatly aligned, all containing a yellowish fluid.

I remember these ampoules: I used them to prepare the potion myself eons ago. I know there are 153 ampoules there, each for one of my 151 soldiers, and another two for Arthur and myself.

A shadow appears, smiles at me for an instant, and disappears. It wears elegant, outdated clothing, on a body that looks like mine. I smile back in recognition of my past self, reverberating from a long gone time.

“Each man should take an ampoule and bring it to the library. Don’t let them drink the potion just now. They first have to reach the library,” the echo of the shadow resonates after its last wisps dissolve from my sight.

The men obey to the instructions of my past shadow cast into the present.

The square of soldiers reshapes itself into a line, as my men wait for their turn to take the potion that will unlock the secret of the door. Then they return to their former positions, the square reforms, and the silence falls.

These men are too disciplined, I think. Do they have opinions? Can I really count on them to help me open the door?

“Where is the library? Do you know?” I challenge them.

The army remains silent.

“I don’t know the way to the library,” I repeat, but to no avail.

“Iris-” Arthur starts, but I cut his sentence before he can continue.

“I know each of you has been here before,” I insist.

“Iris, you must bring them to the library. If you don’t, they will not be able to become the men you want them to be,” Arthur states, this time with a tone too decisive for me to interrupt.

“Very well,” I say, with a note of defiance in my tone.

“You have to lead the way, they cannot get you there,” Arthur iterates.

I don’t know the way though, and I landscape the place, hoping for a hint.

I see two doors, and suddenly I cringe at the memory of a feeling that had terrorized me in a time I can no longer recollect. I know that only one door will lead to the library, while the other will lead to a spot that can drive my army and me to insanity, perhaps death.

Slowly, I approach one of the two doors. I run my fingers across its edge and sense the rough rocks around it in search of an answer.

And the army waits, silent.

I move to the other door and repeat the process, and yet I cannot get my memories to emerge.

A rush of panic runs through me, I feel lost. I have an army ready to follow me, but I don’t know where to go. The army is useless, the potions the old me prepared, waiting for this moment for centuries, will go to waste, and I will disappoint all hopes of my father the king. The royal family will perish.

Defeated, I let the tears roll down my eyes.

“What is happening Iris?” Arthur asks me.

"You cannot count on me, Arthur. Please bring these men away, I don't know what to do with them," I sob, crashed by the sense of inadequacy.

"Not at all, Iris. Focus," he objects calmly.

"You have to know where to stop, Arthur," I reply.

"What do you mean?" he asks.

"I said I cannot do it," I repeat, disheartened and angry at once.

"When you and I walked out of this place, long ago, what did we do? Do you remember, the two of us together?" Arthur asks.

I am not sure about the purpose of his question, but I reply nonetheless.

"We spoke about our experiments here, I suppose. We discussed about how to improve our potions," I say.

"Yes, and about how to use them in the future, right?" he continues.

"Yes," I say.

"You envisioned a direction for your future," Arthur says.

"I did," I reply, wondering the rationale behind his statement.

"And now you can no longer envision it. That's why you refuse to remember your way to the library," he concludes.

"What are you talking about, Arthur?" I reply defensively.

The army remains silent, but their eyes are disapproving rather than obedient now.

"Who did we do in the future, Iris?" Arthur insists.

"We met my brother," is my instinctive reply.

"Do you remember someone who tried to prevent you from talking with your brother?" Arthur continues me.

"You mean in mine 503?" I ask.

Arthur does not reply.

I walk through the bench of the door to which I am closest, alone. I keep running my fingers along the walls, in the semi-obscurity of the tunnel. At a point I feel an odd pattern on the wall, the roughness is no longer random. I stop, slowly inspecting the walls with my fingers. Something is written on the wall.

My fingers trace the letters. There's an "M", and an "I". I am trying to make out the third letter when a hollow scream breaks the silence.

"We must cut!" it shrieks, and I remember this voice. It reverberates from Mine 503, and I hate it now even more than I hated it then.

I see the wall deform, and Arthur's face appears, squeezed against it.

"Arthur!" I yell.

"We must cut, cut, cuuut, ccccut, t, t, t" the voice screams again and then crackles, agonizing.

The spell is about to break, but before the wall turns dark, before silence falls, I plunge my arms through the rocky walls. It deforms and yields, and lets me through to Arthur. Something resembling an electric shock flashes through my arms, I feel sucked into a new element, my head spins.

I am tempted to surrender, but Arthur is there. I can't let go.

I pull back, with all my forces, dragging Arthur with me.

We fall back, breathless for a moment.

"Arthur..." I whisper.

He doesn't reply.

"Arthur?" I shake him.

He opens his eyes, slowly.

"So you've got some guts left, thanks god," he says.

"Shut up, will you?" I say, slapping him, grateful that he's here with me, alive.

"Thank you, Arthur," I tell him.

"Thank you?" he arches his brows.

"Yes, for helping me find my way," I tell him, pulling him up and leading him out of the tunnel.

Out of the tunnel my army stands immobile, waiting.

"This way, brave men," I command, slipping back into the commander's role, smiling a broad wild grin to fuel my wavering faith.

## **Chapter 46**

The men follow me, once more obedient, trustful. They look at me, holding the ampoules filled with potion.

They appear solid, nearly invincible.

We will succeed, I think, and my thoughts reverberate through them. I sense their bodies tend, their eyes glow.

And yet, for a flashing instant, through the blink of my eyes I see their sturdy bodies turn transparent, dissolve away leaving nothing but a silhouette drawn in fine ink, an inconsistent profile.

I am petrified.

“Don’t stop, Iris. This mission will be what you make of it,” Arthur prods me, gripping my wrist so strongly that it almost hurts.

I nod to him, to my army, one more comprised of corpulent men.

I start marching towards the library, when I sense a flow, blowing from my back. It’s pushing me forward, its pressure seems light and yet I am aware that it would not allow me to stop even if I wanted. Its intensity increases at every step I take, the gentle flow becomes a torrent, and the torrent a sea. A deep blue atmosphere swallows me, propels me forward. I want to turn around to see if Wilhelm is by my side and if my army is behind, but I cannot.

In the blue immensity surrounding me I simply exist, without conscience of my breathing, without will.

But then, suddenly, the flow subsides, and I find myself in an atrium, alone, dripping the odd liquid that brought me here.

I look at my drenched body, trying to decipher the meaning of what happened. As I observe my wet sleeves I notice subtle whiffs of smoke exuding from my clothing. I study the phenomenon, mesmerized.

And at once I am dry.

Why did I get here? What was I doing before an unknown current wrapped me and deposited me in this spot?

I shake my head, struggling to remember.

I walk ahead, hesitantly. And there, around the corner, a library opens before me.

The library, yes. That’s what I was looking for.

There’s a book on the table.

Beside it stands a girl. She looks like me. She *is* me.

“You’re so forgetful Iris. Why are you scared to remember?” she asks me.

I am silent.

"You and I had a conversation some time ago," she continues.

"Which conversation?" I want to know.

"These were my words: Father would recognize the exceptional circumstance when it happened, grandfather said. The book was stored in a safe, and nobody but father knew the code to open it. One night father sought refuge in the library to clear his mind. He noticed the book on the library's table, right in front of the chair where he usually sat, and he knew the time had come", she says.

"The time for what?" I ask, but the other me dissolves away.

"The time for what?" Arthur voice echoes at my back.

I start.

"Don't play tricks with her. She needs help, can't you see she's overwhelmed?" Matt and Wilhelm reply in unison.

I turn around with a jerky twist. Arthur is in one corner of the library, Wilhelm and Matt are in the opposite side, eyeing him angrily.

"You placed Ludwig inside her, how could you?" they address him accusingly.

"My intentions were good, and you know. It was a joint decision between Iris's mother and I, and you know this too. It was a mistake, but not all is lost. Ludwig is not inside Iris anymore, and our goal is to rid ourselves of him. Right? The future is in Iris's hands, and we are here to help. I am here to help. *You* should be here to help too, not to point fingers," Arthur retorts.

"We are here to help," Matt replies, and Wilhelm nods.

"We are certainly here to help. All we ask you is to stop assuming Iris is invincible, because she clearly cannot find all answers alone," Wilhelm continues.

I cannot tell if I am relieved or insulted by the statement.

"When you told me not to trust Arthur was this the reason?" I ask, addressing Wilhelm.

"You told her not to trust me?!" Arthur exclaims, and I see the anger in his eyes.

"Of course I did. You burdened her with a weight she cannot carry, you've made poor decisions," Wilhelm replies, the anger in Arthur's eyes reflected in his.

"Time out, guys," I interrupt, and they drop their accusations, their attention suddenly on me.

I pause for an instant, smiling at each of them.

"This is time for what? That was my question," I remind them.

And at that instant an army appears. I remember them. These are supposed to be my men.

They carry ampoules in their hands. I know they'll drink the content for me, and then something will happen, even though I am no longer sure about what.

Am I scared to remember? Or I am scared to know the future?

I don't have the time to ponder, because at once my men bring the bottles to their lips, and drink.

## **Chapter 47**

As the men drink, I feel the potion diffuse within me. A sound rises, suffused at first, then louder, and finally deafening.

I try to cover my ears, but my hands can't move, as if someone were holding me by the wrists to prevent me from protecting myself against the noise.

It's so loud I can't decode it, I feel annihilated by it.

And yet, a bit at a time, I sense it change. Or perhaps I am changing. What seemed an incongruous brouhaha acquires meaning.

I hear, distinctly, a choir of voices. They are the voice of my men. The sound is all is left of them.

*The philosopher said, know yourself.*

*The philosopher said, know yourself.*

*The philosopher said, know yourself.*

*The philosopher said, know yourself.*

*The philosopher said, know yourself.*

*Yourself, know, the philosopher said, know, know, yourself, yourself, yourself, know yourself.*

The words echo, over and again, bouncing within me.

The book still sits on the table, in the middle of the room where there's nobody but me.

I walk to it and open it.

*Iris*, the first page says.

I flip it, and on the second one faded words start taking shape.

*Freedom*, I read.

A chill run through my spine, but I keep turning the pages.

*Loneliness*, it says.

I start to cry.

With shaking hands, I flip the page.

*Ruthlessness and destruction*, I read.

Is this really me?

I turn the page, once more.

*Reunion and love*, the book tells me.

*Discovery and curiosity*, the next page recites.

*A million bodies*, follows.

A million bodies? What is this supposed to mean?

*"That you cannot be one,"* the book whispers, its pages flipping of their own will, before the book closes.

Silence.

I try to grasp the meaning of the words I've seen. Clasp my head between my hands, I sit on the table, with the book in front of me.

What is the key to opening the door? How can I find it through these words?

The hours pass till I lose the sense of time, unable to trace a path.

Crumpled in the net of thoughts woven by my unstable mind, numbed by the passing of time, I let my head drop on the table and close my eyes.

But as darkness dawns on me, a new stage opens.

## **Chapter 48**

I'm seated in front of the door, wrapped in a nest of ivy that prevents me from moving. The twigs are woven around me, tight around my arms and ankles.

"We've risked our lives to bring you here, why are you not opening the door?" I hear a swarm of voices ask behind me.

I can barely move my head, but I manage to turn around. My army is standing there, seeking an answer.

"Leave," I state, with an unexpected fullness in my voice.

"We are you, Iris. We cannot leave," they reply.



“My family created you to ensure I’d meet their expectations. You are not me. You are the fruit of all expectations oppressing me. Now leave,” I repeat.

The men are surprised at my tone, and for a moment they are speechless.

“We cannot,” they insist after a pause.

*Freedom*, I think.

“I will open the door, but not for you. I will open it on my own terms and conditions. I said, for once and for all, leave.”

The men’s faces turn pale, their bodies shiver.

“Why?” they ask perplexed.

I stare at them coolly, without offering an answer.

Slowly, the men melt away. For an instant I feel a pang of pain, the liquefying shapes rise, with the glimpse of a hope in their agonizing eyes. The instant comes and goes, and when all figments of the army disappear in filaments of smoke I am alone in the forest, facing the door.

*Loneliness*, the book said.

I sense the twigs release their grip, and I slip off the nest of leaves that had imprisoned me. I stand up, and push the door.

I sense it yield. I push it again, and it starts to open with a screechy call of pain.

Before me is an endless mass of black space. My old home: The universe, vast, pitiless and endlessly thrilling.

On the bench of the door, divided by an infinitesimal distance from the precipice of blackness, is a bottle. It is familiar. I pick it up, and in it I see a deformed black embryo. Its blackness is not the same blackness of my space. It is dismal and revolting.

What I am holding in my hands is Uncle Ludwig’s embryo.

As I am looking at it, a faraway echo reverberates from space. It’s a kid’s voice, and it sounds sweet and innocent for this one moment.

*I could have been your brother, if only they hadn’t killed me...*

I look at the bottle, hesitating. Is there no goodness in this embryo?

A female voice calls me, its woeful tone resonating in the empty space.

*Do you know how lonely I felt when they took my baby from me? Do you know my despair when Arthur made me sterile? Please don't kill my baby, please Iris...*

It's the queen's voice, the voice of a clone produced by a reckless nation to destroy my family.

*Ruthlessness and destruction*, I remember.

"You've gone too far, and now there's only one action I can take," I state.

I observe the bottle one last time, and then, with all the strength I have in my lanky body, I launch it in the abyss of the unknown. The place I call home, my element. Not Ludwig's.

The bottle flows through darkness, twisting as if fighting to win its last chance, and then I hear a shriek, acute, prolonged, almost unbearable, and the bottle shatters. Ludwig's embryo catches fire. His mother the queen is a cloud of smoke around him, I see her face appear, dissolve in a pained scatter of rage and tears, exploding as a firework in the darkness of the endless night.

Once the last ashes have burned into nothingness, silence falls.

Now that I have achieved what I had fought for and paid my dues, now that the royal family is safe, can I be happy?

I've given all I had. Have I gained the right to freely roam this desolate vastness where I need to lose myself and which I need to explore to feel alive?

Yes, Space is mine again. And yet a pang of sadness runs through me.

*Reunion and love*, the book tells me.

That's my destiny too.

I landscape the scenery, seeking clues, but nothing is in sight. I take a deep breath, ready to leap into blackness, when a pulsating dot of light unexpectedly appears at an undefined distance.

## **Chapter 49**

I keep my eyes on the pulsating dot, my hope revived. Perhaps I am not alone. Gushes of wind from outer space start to blow, and I suddenly realize that I am almost naked, barely covered by some battered remnants of clothing loosely hanging on me. I am tempted to ball up to try and warm my skinny body, but I stand there, tense towards the pulsing light.

I wonder if it will ever approach me and detect my presence, and right when I am asking myself the question it flashes with renewed intensity, grows bigger and splits into two racing dots.

"Wow!" I exclaim, smiling for the first time after a time too long to remember.

The dots become bigger, and now I am undeniably sure it is coming my way. It gets closer and closer, and at last I can clearly distinguish two spaceships. One is mine! I know it's mine, I can recognize it!

I raise my arms, exhilarated, and scream "Hello!" with uncontainable happiness. I am still jumping in the air, unable to contain my enthusiasm, when an arm elongates from the ship, reaching towards me.

I hop on the platform, praying that I'll find Arthur on my spaceship. I close my eyes and begin whispering his name, as if the intensity of my thoughts could cause him to incarnate before me.

My eyes are still closed when the arm stops moving, and I hear a mechanic click. I open them and a door opens, letting me in the protected atmosphere of the ship. The winds subside and a suffused light envelops me, soothing and warm.

And I see Arthur.

"Iris!" he greets me, as I rush toward him, hugging him tighter than I ever have, unable to speak.

"Hey, calm down. You've made it at last!" he smiles, gripping my shoulder as he observes me.

"*Of course* I've made it! What do you think?" I laugh, as the past struggles appear suddenly irrelevant.

"I was sure you'd make it, don't get so defensive," he tells me, and I laugh again.

"I'm not defensive, I just want to know who's in the other spaceship out there," I reply, playing chill.

"Ah, I was just wondering why you hadn't asked yet," Arthur winks.

"So?" I insist.

"So," he echoes, taking me by the hand and bringing me to the control room.

"Are you ready?" he asks, while pressing a button.

## **Chapter 50**

A membrane shivers and buzzes, and finally the gate between the spaceships open.

My mother, my father and my brother are there. Mother tends her arms towards me, and hugs me first, tears running from her eyes.

"I am so sorry child, I am so terribly sorry we worked you so hard. I knew you'd make it, I always had faith in you," she tells me.

"You were wrong mother, I was so close to failing," I say, pulling back.

"Iris," father says, calmly.

"Father," I reply, bowing my head slightly.

I take my mother's hand and repeat, "I was so close to failing."

"We were so close to failing," he tells me.

I stay silent.

"It doesn't matter, because we made it. And if you make it once, you know you can make it again," says my brother.

I smile, slightly resentful for reasons I cannot ascertain and yet relieved because of their presence.

"Someone wants to thank you," my father tells me after a pause.

"Thank me?" I repeat, rounding my eyes.

Matt and Wilhelm step forward.

"I never understood what you were holding against Arthur," I tell them before they get the chance to greet me.

"Everyone here burdened you, and Arthur was the worst of them all," Matt says

Four pair of eyes turn towards him, their expression half reproachful, half sad.

"Why the worst?" I want to know.

"Because you loved him, and you still do. Because of that he felt entitled to burden you more than all others," Wilhelm says.

"What on earth—" Arthur begins to say, but I place a finger on his lips.

"What I went through was my journey. Mine, you see," I say, and silence falls.

"It was mine because I chose to go through with it, whichever the reason," I continue.

My father nods.

"But it is not over," I conclude.

My mother looks at me, tending her body towards me.

"What comes next, my child?" she asks me.

"I remember the book, and there is more in it than what I've lived so far. I've opened this door, but that's not it," I reply.

"Yes. What did the book say?" she prods me.

"*Discovery and curiosity, and a million bodies,*" I reply.

"What does this mean?" my brother asks me.

“Give me the time for a sleep and a dream, and I will tell you,” I smile, as five pair of questioning eyes stare at me.

“I am really tired,” I say, walking towards what I remember used to be my bedroom.

## **Chapter 51**

I yawn, and open my eyes slowly.

“Have you partied yesterday night or was my lecture that boring, young lady?” professor Arthur Miles asks.

My defiance burns against his Miles aplomb as he looks at me, his eyes ironic but attentive.

“After all we’ve gone through I don’t even know how you came up with your lecture on time. And don’t play dumb, ok?” I say.

Arthur looks at me, intrigued.

“I know you remember where we were just before I went to sleep,” I continue.

Arthur arches his brows.

*“Once upon a time you and I travelled to a place of death to find something of infinite value. There was a large metal door, but I hesitated in front of it, swaying between awe, fear and desire. You stood beside me and took my hand, and for that one instant I felt safe. This is what I told you when I last stepped in your office, after this same lecture. Do you remember?”* I ask.

Arthur Miles cannot speak.

“Do you remember?” I ask again.

“You had this same dream?” Arthur Miles whispers.

“This same dream...yes. Was it a dream, Arthur?”, I say.

He’s still silent.

“Our journey isn’t over Arthur,” I tell him.

“No, it isn’t,” he admits.

*“Discovery and curiosity,”* I recite.

Arthur looks at me and smiles. He starts to shuffle some ruffled scientific papers lying on his desks, and produces the book from under them.

“Have you and I been reading the same sources lately?” he winks.

I smile, and he smiles back, before turning serious.

“Yes, we cannot stop. But why can’t we ever stop? Why do we have to be tormented like this all the time?” he asks me.

“Because we are a *million bodies*,” I tell him.