Honors Thesis Approval

Department of English

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I hereby recommend that the honors thesis prepared under my supervision by:

Jamariah White

"LGBTQIA+ Literature across the fiction genres:

Exploration of Identity through Fantasy, Science, and Realistic Fiction"

be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the departmental requirements in University Honors.

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Abstract

Over the course of three semesters, I focused on the representation of LGBTQIA+ identities, focusing on relationships and sexuality in the realm of fiction. I wrote and revised nine short stories, three each in the genres of Fantasy, Science, and Realistic fiction. Science Fiction is the only genre whose stories relate to each other, the other six have nothing in common on the surface. I read novels from each genre and used two craft books on narrative and writing suspense to guide me as I wrote. After the completion of each story, I wrote a reflective essay that discussed what techniques I used and the writing and revision process for each story.

Keywords: Janet Burroway, James Scott Bell, Yuki, magic, angels, demons, relationships, serum, dormitory/dorm.

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Table Of Contents

Fantasy Fiction Reflection

This semester, I read the book *A Wrinkle in Time* by Madeleine L'Engle and *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft* by Janet Burroway; the tenth edition. Burroway's craft book set me up to better understand how to write scenes of dialogue, tips for using past memories in the narrative, and how to characterize a character through scenes. Those three are only examples, as she discussed much more, but are the topics I found myself focusing on the most when composing the three fantasy short stories in this portfolio. Her nine-chapter book divided into every aspect of creative writing and the through-line in each chapter was *how* to format a story.

As mentioned earlier, writing scenes was something I focused on in her book; she introduces the topic in chapter two which focused on "showing and telling." One of the first tips she gave that I implemented into my writing was the usage of commas in dialogue tags. Before reading this book, I would use dialogue tags like this: {"I really hate you." I said.}. After reading her book, I use them like this: {"You don't understand," I said.}. Another aspect of dialogue that I picked up on was to combine the sentences spoken by one person into one paragraph instead of separate lines, this also worked for actions the characters do after speaking. As you'll see in the fantasy stories below, I implemented this strategy in areas I saw fit.

The second tip that I focused on in my writing was the usage of past memories and explaining the context the reader needs to know when it is brought up. The style of my writing before relied on my own memories to know what history propels the drama forward so having Burroway's book on how to smoothly add that information in between the drama was helpful. I planned out each story with timelines and dates before writing them, but my reader knows none of that information so reading her tips about how to smoothly transition between dialogue and context was useful.

Ultimately, how much information you give to the reader depends on the purpose of the story which brings me to a sub-point. At the beginning of my thesis planning, I had the idea to create three full stories within the subgenres of Fiction: fantasy, scientific, and realistic. However, as I began meeting with Professor Lawhorn and discussing craft, I realized how difficult that would be to juggle with everything else I was doing. It was then that I decided to just write short stories and to Professor Lawhorn's suggestion--three stories per genre. I wasn't sure what made a short story short until reading Burroway. A piece of advice that stuck with me through this transition was that a short story needs to answer one question. This helped me narrow down the plots of my stories and focus on the easiest drama to write about.

This tip was something that I recognized in L'Engle's writing of *A Wrinkle in Time*. Each chapter raised a question or uncertainty, and it was the next chapter's job to uncover the truth. Burroway mentions that fiction works differently depending on the length (i.e. short story v. novel) and from my understanding-- length is determined by how many questions you want the characters to ask. As a student writer, I think asking one question is doable and it's why I plan out the entire narrative before writing to see which question would be the most interesting to answer.

As you will see in this portfolio, I don't exactly answer any questions, but I make my characters acknowledge newfound information that has affected their otherwise normal life. This includes adding contextual and background information to understand the terms brought up in the narrative of their respective worlds and the reasoning behind certain reactions to drama.

The last tip was the characterization in scenes which is the one I struggled with the most. Having the worlds and plot written out had nothing to do with physical descriptions of characters and I subconsciously didn't focus on it until hearing Professor Lawhorn's feedback. The amount of revision I did to add characterization focused on what I felt was necessary to understand a

character during a particular scene, but I don't think it shows as much as it should. Characterization is something that I will continue to work on through the creation of science and realistic fiction stories.

The order in which I decided to place these three fantasy stories focused on the level of creativity I brought into the process of writing. "Spea" which is another word for magic took the longest time to prep. As mentioned previously, I like to plan out the plot and understand the world before writing, and with Spea, there was a lot to understand and unravel. I created the language inside the story using Latin, flowers to describe birth, and a Venn Diagram to describe the structure of the world. Spea was also the first story I wrote for this project, so I was obsessed with it a little more than the other two.

"The Guardians" was the last story I wrote but the second most prepared. I needed to understand as a writer, what makes the women in my story stand out. After experiencing and receiving feedback on characterization for the first two stories, I focused more on characterization for the women in "The Guardians" when planning it out. I tried to characterize them in the story by their tone in dialogue and reactions. In terms of world-building, I spent less time on that since the question being answered focused on a setting on Earth (specifically in the Northern Hemisphere).

"Exiled and Opposition" received the least amount of original planning because Angels and Demons are a trope that has been used often in the literary realm of media and is a familiar one. based my Angels and Demons on existing religious explanations and focused more on the homosexuality and birthing of the trope mpreg--which means a man who can get pregnant. Those two aspects make the story a perfect mix of fantasy and the drama in the story practically wrote

itself. Heaven, Hell, and Earth were also self-explanatory worlds, and I explained the setting of the place on Earth since it was the primary setting.

I would say compared to "Spea", the other two had a better grip on setting and while I did add some more setting and characterization to "Spea" during revision, I definitely could work on it more. In my eyes, "Spea" needs a completely new draft in order to implement these elements because the way it reads now focuses more on drama and not the setting of the world I created.

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Spea

The room was shaking. Shaking the way the appliance Awelans call a 'dryer' shakes when it's powered on and is running through its cycle. Shaking with vibrations I could hear, the loud and disturbing pulsating, as if the walls had a heartbeat. A constant shake, a constant noise that caused my emotionally absent parents to swing open the wooden door that had contained the shaking to my room.

"Mera! What the hell is going on?!" My father yelled.

They're home? They're usually never home.

"Mera? Mera, are you okay?" My mother asked.

Her feet sunk into the blue rug in the middle of my room, crossing over its circular structure to bring her to the side of my bed. I was sitting on the edge of my bed with my hands resting beside my body. My legs dangled over the edge, with my feet at a downturned angle. The shaking began to slowly retreat from the interior of my room to my body as I blinked.

"What happened? Your face is so hot," she said, placing her hands on my cheeks.

I grabbed her wrists, pulling them away from my face as I felt a burning sensation in the middle of my face. It felt stifling and two seconds went by before blood dripped from my nostrils causing my mother to gasp.

"Mera, are you using too much—."

"I'm fine," I said, and I let her hands go.

"What are you doing?" Father asked.

"Feeling happy," I said.

She looked at my father before stepping back, pushing her lips in a thin line. The burning in my face started to cool itself and the blood dripping stopped. The blue Listo shorts I was

wearing had four drops of blood on them and it reminded me that despite being waterproof, ironically they aren't blood resistant.

"What is it?" I asked, wiping the skin underneath my nose with my left thumb.

Enacting a small disappearance spell that works well with liquids (inferno) lifted the blood from my thumb as I swiped it against my skin. It's the spell I use the most since I get nosebleeds often and I've never activated it by word of mouth since it doesn't require much spea (magic) for a nosebleed..

"You applied for an expedition in Awela," Father said. "Why do you plan to go there?"

"You're bothered with requests for travel as a councilman?"

"When it concerns my family."

“Mera, you shouldn't talk to your father that way," my mother said. "We're worried about you."

"The request was thorough and if the Itineratur Council had questions. I would have been summoned for questioning. I don’t understand why you are questioning me instead," I said.

"Mera—."

"I'm denying it,” father said.

"You can't do that!" I said as I stood up.

"You have no need to explore the human realm," he said. "You learned enough in school."

"You didn't look at the request! You're just acting as councilman. It was never going to go through, was it? The Archmages care too much about my movements and you’re just their sycophant."

"Mera, you graduated three years ago. You have to find your place in Metospea," she said.

I shook my head, sitting down against my bed before maneuvering my body to lean against the wall the bed is up against. I pulled my legs against my upper body and buried my head in the gap between. The burning sensation emitting from my head began to slowly return causing the shaking of my room to do the same.

“You have a grip on magic that no one else has. No one has graduated from the academy as early as you,” she said. “As the headmaster, nothing has made me prouder.”

“You can join any sector you want,” he said.

So, they say, every time I attempted to join Itineratur, I wasn’t accepted. They only want me to be a part of the council. I can’t even join the Consultare Council. Anything that would put me close to the other realms, they shut down. The Consultare Council, unlike the Itineratur Council, doesn't deal with traveling between worlds, but with the issues within them.

“I want to go to Awela,” I said, wrapping my arms around my legs, shutting my eyes as my body heat rose.

“Mera you—,” he started to say.

“Why don’t we talk at dinner tonight? You haven’t joined us in quite some time and since Aiari is home from training, it would be nice to have dinner with the five of us,” she said.

“Dinner?”

“I’ll make your favorites, so be downstairs at 20:00. Relax yourself in the meantime.”

I didn’t hear their footsteps, but I did hear my door close, and I let my body fall to my right. I collapsed my limbs and sighed as I tried to make myself feel less frustrated. I graduated from the Spea Academiae at sixteen because my magic was self-stabilizing; I didn’t need to be taught anything but the rules of our society.

In geometrical Awelan terms, our society is one of three hexagons that are connected in the center—which is more of a Venn diagram except there's only one overlapping opening. Metospea controls that opening, which means there are a lot of rules I had to learn. Rules I'm supposed to be ecstatic about following and I would be, if those rules were straightforward and had a section that said, "MERA WORTHINGTON SPECIFIC."

I was looking forward to my life after graduation but in a world where rules and regulations control personal interest and seem to be limiting my interests more than anyone else's, I quickly realized that there was nothing to look forward to. Spea, or as Awelans call it, Magic is the sole determinant of life. The more Spea you have, the more options you have, except that if you have too much, like me, your options are limited.

"I don't have favorites," I whispered as my nose began to bleed again.

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"YOU'RE WASTING YOUR TALENTS MERA!" My father yelled at me, and I closed my eyes, pushing my lips together. "I DON'T UNDERSTAND WHY YOU CAN'T JUST JOIN THE COUNCIL!"

"Honey, you shouldn't scream at him," mother said calmly.

I was sitting with the rest of the family at the dining table although they had finished their food already. Today's dinner was steak, asparagus, mashed potatoes, shrimp, and salad. I was given the same amount as my father, but I could only finish half of everything. It wasn't because I wasn't hungry or that I didn't like the food--our family's cook Mika was good at her job, I just haven't been stomach food recently.

Of course, the topic of dinner was what my siblings, who are 19 and 18, plan on doing for the family's legacy— especially since the Worthington and Vesa blood merged. My younger

sister plans to further her education in magic and follow my mother's lead. My younger brother plans to join the militia. My father wants me to eventually replace him on the magic council like he did for his father because it's a Worthington tradition. Mastimela Worthington was one of the founding fathers on the council and was the sole original author pertaining to the rules of the magic realm. He was a pretty big deal and the fact that I am a splitting image of him (white hair and an iris that changes color every minute) has elders on the edge of their seats.

My siblings look like carbon copies of my mother, they all have black hair, dark green eyes, and a warm honey-brown skin tone. Most if not all the Vesa bloodline looks like them, most Mages aren't genetically that different from each other. My father's hair is dark blonde, and he has blue eyes with mocha-colored skin. My father is a Worthington and one of the most genetically diverse families in Metospea.

"I don't want to," I said quietly.

"Mera, you do understand the weight of your words right?" My mother asked.

"You're Matsi-."

"I'm not him, mother! I don't want to be him, I- papa, you're not even the first born son so you shouldn't have a problem with Aiari taking your place," I said.

He didn't seem to like that answer. "Aiari can't take my place," he said, and I was surprised he wasn't screaming at me.

My father was sitting on the end of the table, the end that faces the dining room doors. My mother was on his left, my sister, Ari was across from her and Aiari, my brother, was sitting on the right side of her. I was forced to sit at the end of the table, facing my father because I didn't feel comfortable next to my mother. I can't remember the last time I sat at this rectangular

wooden table with the fire-earth emblem representing Worthington bloodline in the middle, but I remember why I prefer not to.

"He's a better fit than I am! I-i can't do it Papa," I said, looking down at my lap.

"Then give him your magic," he said, and I rubbed my lips.

"RIEI," mother yelled and, I looked up at him.

"How can y-," mother started to say, but I was actually relieved by those words.

"Okay," I said, causing Aiari and my sister Ari to look at me.

"What?" Aiari asked.

"You think I want this? T-this emptiness that prevents me from eating properly and having depression every time I use my magic?" I asked, confused. "The depression that everyone chooses to ignore, like they don't see it but praised me for powers I didn't ask for? Take them—in fact you don't even have to, but I don't want them anymore." A single tear rolled down my left cheek.

No one said anything and I knew that my father was just talking out of anger. He doesn't want Aiari in his position or me to give up my magic. He cares too much about what other people think to let me do such a thing.

"When you were conceived, the Archmages received a prophecy. 'He will grow with pain and shall not be given to thee demon'. When you were a baby, you cried non-stop when the sun was up and there wasn't a spell that could soothe you except the darkness. I was afraid the prophecy was true until I learned the truth about Mastimela Worthington," Mother said.

"What truth?" Ari asked.

"Honey, tell him," Mother said, looking at my father and he looked at her.

“Loctis!” He chanted; it’s a simple spell that makes the area you want enclosed in an invisible barrier.

The more magic you have, the more powerful the barrier. This is a first-rate offensive barrier, and it’s taught to be used to make an area essentially soundproof. It can be the ears of others around you— if you’re powerful enough— or to prevent outsiders from hearing anything inside the barrier. The funny thing though, is that it doesn’t stop people from coming into the space you put a barrier up in. It just eliminates all chances of them hearing you and my father put it up around the entirety of the massive dining room we have. So, if Mika were to come in, she would be able to hear the secrets my parents have kept.

“This can’t leave this room,” Father stated while looking at the water glass in front of him, “Mera is the only one who needs to hear this so I’m trusting that you two know your memory guard spells well.”

“Of course, Papa,” Aiari and Ari said.

“Mastimela Worthington was in love with a vampire,” he said, causing the two of them to look at each other.

“Vampires are forbidden to come into Metospea, that’s why we have three realms,” Ari said.

“Yeah. Here, the human world, and the shadow realm,” Aiari said.

“There weren't always three,” Mother said.

“Mom, you were the one who taught us that,” Aiari said.

“Yes, because the peace of the three realms and their rules rely on fabrications. However, I don’t know everything— no one knows,” she said.

“The Purebloods— it’s thought that because of the way Mastimela died, the world between wielders of magic and magical creatures needed to be separated,” Father said.

As he talked, I couldn't help but stare at the large portrait on the wall behind my mother. It was a portrait made from magic to put all Elders and first children to represent the Purebloods. There were twelve of them, the first users of Spea, the first in their bloodline, and yet Mastimela wasn't depicted. He was their creator and was supposed to be the most respected Mage in history, but he wasn't in the painting that drew all the Purebloods in their prime.

“Was he killed by the vampire?” Ari asked.

“That is what’s believed amongst the families,” Mother said.

“What’s the truth then?”

“The Archmages killed him,” Father said, causing my siblings eyes to widen. “In order to be with his lover, he gave his power back to the earth which created the Mitsu Tree that houses the rawest form of magic power. In return, he would become human which would allow him to fully turn into a vampire.” He turned to look at my mother.

“The original five Archmages despised magical beings and didn’t want Mastimela to ruin the future legacy of purebloods— so they killed him which created the elements of dark magic. Magic was created to nurture not kill,” Mother explained.

“What happened to the vampire then?” Aiari asked.

“He became blinded by rage which caused the Great War.”

“One vampire?” Ari asked.

“He was one of the original three. He was influential and the strongest vampire in history.”

"Wait— are you talking about Mortas? The Vampire War Commander? They were in love—two guys?" Aiari asked.

"I believe that is why you have to go to court in order to properly give your magic powers up for any reason, which is why it won't be that simple for you, Mera. As well as strict rules about dating/marriage outside of your kind," Mother said.

"The demon from the prophecy then is a vampire?" Ari asked.

"Not just any vampire."

"Mortas the Commander is dead though, right Mom?" Aiari asked, looking at her and she pushed her lips together.

"That's what we've been told for centuries but this has been the first time since the war with the humans that Ase the Truthful has given a prophecy, so the Archmages believe he isn't dead. That he's been waiting for Mastimela's reincarnation so he reclaim him," Mother said.

"That's why you want me to join the council?" I asked. "Because you're scared?"

"We aren't sca-," Father said but me standing up caused my chair to fall beneath my body, interrupting him.

"You don't actually care about me, do you? They're just scared of their ancestors' mistakes, and I'm supposed to just happily go along with what they want?! Is that what the lock is?"

"What lock?" Ari asked and I laughed softly.

"How do you know about the lock Mera," Mother asked, getting up slowly. "Who told you about the lock?" she asked again.

I pushed my lips together as tears formed in my eyes, “I-i can feel it! E-everytime I want t-to feel happy or when I smile, it hurts, and it feels like my heart is bleeding. That’s why I know you don’t care. You’re just watching me–like you did earlier.”

“Mera, that’s not true! I do care about you! I just want to protect you. If they think you’re like him— they’ll take you away from me!” She cried, tears accumulating in her brown eyes. “Y-you just have to follow your father’s path and you’ll be safe, Mera.”

“I don’t want to be safe. I want to be happy,” I said, moving away from the dining table.

“Where are you going?” father asked.

“My room.”

“You haven’t finished your food. You barely ate,” mother said, and I bent down to pick the fallen chair up.

“I’ll apologize to Mika,” I said as I scooted the chair underneath the dining table before picking up my plate, silverware, and the glass that was still full of water.

The Guardians

"Are they here?" I asked.

"Yes, I can see them. I'm surprised they're here before us."

"You overslept."

"I've been busy, busier trying to make sure my company won't fall under while we handle this, and it didn't make things any easier for you to be out of commission."

"I'm pretty sure they would have told you to put me in an asylum if they saw me freaking out at work," I said as she put her right hand on the silver handle of the right glass door that had the word 'pull' in white letters.

"I would have too if I didn't know any better. That was the first time I saw you like that."

"Does it give you insight about how my family treated me?" I asked as she opened the door, and she laughed.

"Yeah, a little too much actually," she said before motioning me to walk inside with her left hand.

I walked through the glass door and the first thing I noticed was the smell of coffee. It was the middle of the day, 1:23 PM the last time I checked, and it was the middle of June in San Francisco Bay, California. San Francisco is on the edge of the Pacific and is the closest U.S. territory apart from Hawaii where my vision rose from. The Bay Area is also extremely hot compared to the mild temperatures in New York that I grew accustomed to, but it's nothing like back home in Chile.

Morgan, the woman I flew in with, walked up from behind me and took charge of walking through the diner we were inside of. I followed her quietly, as I am used to doing, and after walking straight for around twelve feet she stopped in front of a booth in the back of the

diner. The deep red booth was aligned against the wall and this wall had a large, white-framed mirror in the center. The booth was also positioned vertically from the door.

"Hey," Morgan said as she sat down on the left side of the booth and I sat on the right side, across from her.

"Did you fly?" Camilia asked.

"Yeah, figured we'd be here for a while."

"I hope not," Camilia said. "I was telling Azura that I'm glad it happened in the summer."

"Why?"

"I don't have any grading to do," she said laughing.

"This diner is different from the ones I've been to," I said, looking around and I saw a green car parked in front of the bathrooms.

"It's a vintage-style restaurant, probably from the 50s or 60s. Older people go crazy for this kind of shit," Camilia said.

"So, what happened?" Azura, who was sitting on the inside of the booth next to me, asked.

"Is it that bad?" Camilia asked.

"Anything she sees is bad," Azura said.

"Yeah but most of the time, we don't need to meet together. We haven't done this for work since Chile."

"Work?" Morgan asked, turning her head towards Camilia with her left eyebrow raised.

"What else do you want me to call it?"

"You think of it as work?" I asked.

"Kinda, I mean before this I was a comfortable Yale graduate and the reward for doing this work is that I know eight languages, but sometimes I get bad headaches that make me agitated, and I have to force control."

"I get that too," Azura said. "It's why I chose to move to Alaska and in a remote area because sometimes I can't control it and that's bad for the civilians around me."

"I know that I forced you guys into this. Basically, I just wanted to prove to myself that I wasn't crazy and that there is something going on out there," I said, picking at the skin around my left thumb—something I do often as a nervous habit.

"I'm not blaming you! You did the right thing by coming and finding us, especially for a little girl who never traveled away from home," Azura said, reaching her left hand out to pat the back of my head.

"A true mother nature," Camilia said and Azura rolled her eyes.

"Shut up," Azura said, taking her hand off my head.

After doing so, a woman wearing a pair of black pants, a black apron around her waist, and a green polo shirt with a black skillet flipping a pancake motif on the left pocket walked up to our table. That's when I noticed the menus on our table and the fact that Azura had an empty glass of water in front of her while Camilia's was half full.

"Good afternoon, how you ladies doin'?" She asked, looking at me and Morgan.

"Good, how about yourself?" Morgan asked.

"Fine, fine. What can I get you to drink?"

"I'll take coffee," Morgan said.

"Decaf or regular?"

"Regular."

"Alright and for you?" She asked, looking at me.

"Um, apple juice," I said, feeling the skin on my left thumb break.

"Did you want to order something, or do you need a few more minutes?"

"By the time you come back, they'll be ready to order," Camilia said, and the waitress, whose nametag on the right side of her shirt said Adaline, nodded.

"Alright then, I'll be right back," Adaline said before walking away.

"Azura's right though, it's not your fault. I've experienced some amazing things in the realm of humanity that I probably wouldn't have even thought about before," Camilia said once Adaline was away from the table.

"The vision I had wasn't like the other ones," I stated as I looked in between Camilia and Azura because Morgan knew about it already.

I had my vision two weeks ago and it was alarming in a way I hadn't seen before. Morgan and I live together so she helped me through an elongated episode which to an ordinary person looks like a seizure. After I was coherent enough to tell her about the vision, she texted Camilia and Azura saying that we needed to meet up and discuss my vision because it required all of our attention.

After moving to the United States from Chile six years ago, the visions I had usually could be solved individually and we always decided who would be best to solve it. Usually, Camilia or Azura go because they have a better grip on the physicality of fighting since the beings from the other world are usually combat-heavy. Morgan uses her telepathy to help coordinate the when and where because my visions are never 100% accurate.

In the past six months, the number of incidents that couldn't be solved with human intervention has increased and I have been having a hard time, like I did when I was in Chile and

part of me wonders if that's why the other women were having more frequent headaches because of the influx in supernatural incidents.

"I didn't see the supernatural, not at first and not for the first couple of times," I explained.

"What does that mean?" Azura asked.

"If you didn't see them, who did you see?"

"Humans," I whispered, and they looked at each other.

"Humans? I thought you said you couldn't see them in your visions, at least not clearly?" Azura asked.

"I couldn't, not before now. That's why I always wanted Morgan to confirm what I saw because I-i never wanted to hurt people."

"So how many did you see?" Camilia asked.

"Ten," Morgan answered for me.

"All at once?"

"Yeah, all at once. At first, she could only focus on them."

"Then what?"

"I saw these looming blue figures. They were tall, like stories tall and there were six of them. They didn't have faces; it was a void of space instead."

"Blue figures? Like the ones we saw in Chile? The ones who looked like they were controlling the supernatural?"

"Yeah, them. I-i still remember how stiff I was when it looked at me," I explained and Azura accompanied Camilia in furrowing their eyebrows in discomfort.

"Wait, I don't understand. Why would humans willingly be around them? They scared the shit out of me, and they still do," Camilia said.

"They brought them here," Azura said. "I mean that's the only thing that makes sense. They weren't being harmed right?" Azura asked, looking at me.

"No, they were talking—to each other and eventually to the figures."

"Wh-do you know who they are?" Camilia asked and she seemed visibly shaken up, confused but also fearful.

"I know what they look like, but I couldn't describe them well to Morgan," I said.

"I don't think they were meeting in this world," Morgan said.

"So, the world they come from?" Azura asked.

Morgan nodded, "the portal is what Juliette thinks is in the Pacific."

As Azura and Morgan talked, I saw that Adaline was coming over and I opened the menu in front of me. I wasn't hungry, but I had only drunk some apple juice and eaten a banana at our hotel earlier, so I knew I should eat something; especially considering that I might not get to for the rest of the day.

"Here you go," Adaline said, setting Morgan's coffee mug on the table before setting my apple juice down. She reached into her apron and grabbed a plastic straw before putting it down in front of me.

"You ladies ready?"

"Yes, can I get the BLT sandwich with extra everything on that including the mayonnaise," Azura said.

"Sure thing," Adaline said after pulling her notepad out and she scribbled on the opened page with a pink pen. "You want coleslaw, potato salad, or fries with that?"

"Fries would be great, thanks."

"I'll take the New York Steak Sandwich with fries," Camilia said, and I was amazed at how quickly she could change her attitude.

"I'll take the Club House with the potato salad," Morgan said.

"Alright and for you?" Adaline asked after she finished writing their orders down.

"Can I have the BBQ ranch salad with extra chicken and corn," I said, and she nodded as she wrote.

"Okay, I'll take these for you," she said, reaching for our menus after putting her notepad and pen back in the apron.

"Thank you," Azura and I said at the same time.

"No problem," Adaline said before walking away.

Once Adaline walked away, Camilia ran her hands over her face and sat still, putting her elbows on the table. The rest of us went quiet and unlike me and Morgan who had a week to process this, Azura and Camilia didn't. We always agreed not to discuss visions over the phone, not the gruesome details anyway. Before Morgan learned and mastered telepathy, I would just text them the basic details and the suspected place as invitations for travel. It became easier to share information freely when Morgan began using telepathy. After all, if anyone heard or saw us then the government (whichever one caught us first) would probably lock us in an asylum or turn us into lab experiments.

The Guardians, as we agreed to call ourselves, were once ordinary human beings who didn't know about the supernatural in our world—at least not realistically. Even when we were exposed, our priority was always to protect and prevent the destruction of mankind, and in Azura's case—the planet was equally important. We've never harmed humans and always

shielded them from the dangers that come with our abilities. Azura: The Elemental, Camilia: The Warrior, Morgan: The Sorcerer, and me, the crazy one with visions of the future.

"If Humans are teaming up with them, if they're the ones who basically dragged us into this life and are calling on the supernatural for whatever reason—what are we supposed to do?" Camilia asked.

None of us could answer her and suddenly, I wasn't hungry at all.

Exiled and Opposition

“Human?! He’s not human! Please don’t tell me you seriously believe that?” Afriel asked.

“What are you talking about?! Why is that what you’re worried about? You almost died!” I yelled.

“The only reason the fight started in the first place is because there have been an unusual amount of demons coming in and out of hell," Afriel said and I rolled my eyes.

Unusual amount sounded as if they were welcomed to be on earth in the first place. I haven't heard the word demon since he stubbornly barged into my life two days ago. The last time we spoke, the number of Demons traveling to and from Hell was less than 100, only new Demons travel so much, and back then--there weren't a lot of them.

“Afriel, that has nothing to do with me anymore. I don’t need to hear about it,” I said, shaking my head.

“You don’t know?” Hanniah asked me.

“Know what?”

“God favors you, that’s why he didn’t erase your memories or take away your ability to see.”

“Favors?” I asked, amused.

My ability to see auras or more simply, energies of others wasn't a favor in my eyes. When I was in my prime, I could see Demons in Hell when I was in Heaven and Angels in Heaven when I was on earth. I have less than 5% of my original eyesight which makes me just as crazy as a human who claims to see ghosts.

"I begged him to let me go, I would have much rather been an orb than continue living. This is his idea of torturing me. Every time I tried to kill myself he would just bring me back! For you to suggest the one person who made me feel safe and sane is a demon is sickening."

"Yaho—."

"Yuki, my name is Yuki," I said clenching my jaw and Afriel pushed his lips together.

"Can I lend you my ears?" Hanniah asked.

"For what?!" I yelled.

"So, you can hear it, hear why Afriel is upset?" She said, holding her transparent hands out towards me.

"I don't care why he's upset! Do you think that he would let me walk around with a demon?! Isn't that why he exiled me in the first place because I care too much about coexistence?"

"I can not speak for God, but he has given me the ability to hear, and I can not choose what I want to hear," she said, and I sighed.

"Will you leave if I do?" I asked and she nodded before Afriel could say anything.

I walked up to her and slowly put my hands on top of hers. She held my hands firmly and I saw her human green eyes turn into her angelic blue eyes as she stared at me. My body shuddered as the familiar feeling of angelic aura flowed into me, it's almost the equivalent of being electrocuted, and the stronger the aura, the sharper the electricity. Luckily for me, Hanniah wasn't that strong.

After a few seconds, I heard five loud thumping sounds.

Lub dub, lub dub, dub dub dub, lub dub.

As the sound invaded my ears, I looked around the room and began to realize that the five heartbeats were coming from within this room. I could hear subtle heartbeats from outside my living room and human voices accompanying them. I looked down at Hanniah because four of the heartbeats were close.

Is she pregnant?

As I focused harder, I heard something different. I could hear the blood in my veins traveling through my body and I noticed that a bulk of it was stopping at my stomach. The oxygen I needed to breathe as a human was also more focused on traveling to my stomach. Using Hanniah's energy amplified my own and when I looked down at my body, I saw something that made me let go of Hanniah's hands. I backed up, hearing the heartbeats invade my ears even though I couldn't really hear them. My hands went to my stomach, the one that has not changed in size but was carrying two foreign objects inside, objects that were in need of my blood and protein.

"Demons can not get humans pregnant, I'm sure that you know this already. They can implant seeds in them but breeding between the two is impossible."

"Stop talking!" I yelled, gripping the cotton fabric covering my stomach. "I know far more than you do, and I don't need an angel lecturing me!"

"He's not any ordinary demon or else he wouldn't be able to stay in the human realm for as long as he has. His presence alone attracts demons and some of them are taking orders," Afriel said.

"So? You think he's giving them orders?! I-is that why you came here?" I asked.

"No, of course not--I'm worried about you!" Afriel said.

“Pregnating a Virtu—,” Hanniah started to say but my overwhelming emotions made me hate her monotone voice more than before.

“I AM NOT AN ANGEL!” I screamed. “I'm not an angel anymore and I would never have been a Seraphim, always a Virtue. He toyed with me knowing that—he would never recognize me that way. I-i finally gave it up and I’m happy! Alex makes me happy, and he is not a demon!”

“So, you deny the children inside you? If he were an angel, we would know about it,” Hanniah said, and I pushed my lips together.

“I will talk to him.”

“Talk to him? He’s been lying to you!”

“Lying? It’s not like I asked him if he was a demon or not!”

“You should be able to see it, which means he is lying. If an Angel—.”

“An angel?! What, like you?” I asked, sadly. “He wouldn’t let one of you ruin his fun or let male angel lovers procreate without his permission.”

“You need to come with me,” Hanniah said, and I scoffed.

Sending children to do your dirty work? He hasn't changed at all. He shouldn't have sent someone as emotional as Afriel and new Angel like Hanniah.

"I’m not going anywhere,” I said as I started moving towards the hallway of my penthouse, away from my spacious living room.

“Yahodel,” a heavy but silky voice said, and I stopped walking.

I pushed my lips together as the word echoed in my mind. I haven’t heard that voice in millennia and I was ashamed of how much control he still had over me.

"My child, I understand your frustration with me, but it is not easy for me either. I cannot bring the exile to heaven without a good reason."

"That was a rule you made! Y-you just don't want to see me!" I said, feeling my throat dry up and tears prickling my eyes. *Ah I feel like a child--I thought I couldn't cry over this anymore.*

"That is not true. Yahodel, I need your cooperation. Will you do that for me?"

I turned around and saw that he had taken over Hanniah's body. Her eyes were glowing a white color that engulfed her iris and sclera. Humans would use the word possessed but because angels are created by God's blessing, the figure they embody belongs to him.

"Come," he said, holding his left hand out and my fingers twitched as my hands raised from my sides.

I slowly walked towards Hanniah's body and as I began to place my left hand on top of her right, he spoke again.

"I don't want you to blame yourself for this mistake. They're others responsible. You'll be able to return to Earth once this is over."

When he said the word mistake, my hand stopped and hovered over hers. His words and his tone didn't align; he spoke neutrally, and his tone was dominant and certain. However, as someone who has disappointed and been outcast by him, I know when his tone isn't meant to be nice. An exiled angel in a human body, who hasn't lost their angelic energy, and has copulated with either a high-ranking demon or a Devil that is capable of impregnating angels. He thinks of it as a mistake, that I have become so naive that I could be a part of something like this. It would be unlike him to be nice to me in this situation.

If only Afriel and Hanniah know, then his goal was to get rid of the evidence before others find out. If he had chosen to ignore my encounters until now, then that means that the archangels and angelic council are aware. Either way, he had no interest in talking about the children or my relationship. He just wanted to dispose of them—the first of their kind—as far as known history goes.

"Mistake?" I whispered as I put my hand on top of hers.

"I know it isn't your fault. It wasn't your intention," he said, and Hanniah's right hand caressed my cheek.

In other words: I know that despite your views on coexistence between the three realms, you would never purposely carry a demon's child. His views are neutral, but within that neutrality are certain things that as a human or angel or a demon, are unacceptable in all realms. He created the Angelic Council to find punishment for these things; giving them minds free of his control.

"You understand, right, Yahodel?" He asked and I nodded, not meeting his eyes. *"You will follow Hanniah and Afriel to the rooftop. It is easier to travel from exterior human structures, at least that is what I'm told."*

"Yes, God," I whispered.

I saw his presence disappear from the room and I took my hand away from Hanniah's. I was barefooted and it was the peak of winter. I have become sensitive to the cold, so I ventured into my bedroom without speaking to either Angel. They knew that I would be back because, despite my exile, it was obvious that I still wanted God's grace and attention.

I dressed myself more warmly, which meant placing black skinny jeans over the black leggings I was wearing. I put on a pair of white ankle socks and these white lace-up ankle boots.

I also wore a lilac purple zip-up jacket and then a white puffer coat that had a faux fur hood. I decorated my neck with a purple scarf and my head with a white beanie. I grabbed these white gloves and strangely, my keys and phone, stuffing them in my pockets. I met the Angels in my living room and motioned them outside of my penthouse. As I closed the door, I pulled my keys out of my right pocket.

"Good evening Yuki how are you?" My neighbor, Mrs. Howard asked as I pulled my key out of my top lock.

"Hi! I'm doing well and yourself?"

"Tired, unusually tired. You look warm," she said as she stepped in front of me, oblivious to the two angels, invisible to her, who stood behind me.

"Not nearly enough as I like to be."

"I haven't seen that boyfriend of yours, the really tall one?" She said and I smiled sadly at the mention of him.

"Don't tell me you've broken up?"

"No, but some people think he might be lying to me."

"What?! That man is so gloomy when you're not next to him. Lord knows you bring light into his life. He ain't lying to you. Tell people to mind their business. They're just jealous," she said, and I nodded.

"I'll tell you how it goes the next time we meet?"

"Alright, be careful out there. It's been snowing all day," she said, and I nodded.

"Have a good night Mrs. Howard," I said, and I began walking past her.

I looked down at my keys, staring at the snowflake keychain that Alessandro (Alex) gifted me six years ago when we were just friends. He told me that my pale skin, crisp white

hair, and blue eyes reminded him of snowflakes falling from the blue sky. These are the angelic features that God let me keep, that I begged to keep and while he wasn't the first to see their beauty, his words felt more poetic to me. Others have painted and sculpted me as their model, a history that humans often point to when they are artistically aware.

"We need to go to the roof."

"There's stairs for that. You can teleport if you want, but I haven't done that in 5,000 years, so I'd rather do it the one time," I said as I continued walking.

"It hasn't been that long," Afriel said.

"Humans round dates, excuse me for not being literal."

I walked to the end of the square hallway where the stairway entrance was. I pushed the door open and stared at the two staircases that would lead to the rooftop. I sighed softly and began climbing them. The door to the rooftop needed an access key that not every resident has, but in the summer, I find myself wanting to escape up here. When I entered the space of the roof, I saw Afriel and Hanniah preparing to take a trip to heaven. For Angels, all you need is a portal, but when you are transporting humans or a human figure, because it is a rare occurrence, it requires more preparation. They were in the middle of the platform and away from the ventilation systems. I went to stand on the side of the building, near one of the larger ventilation fans.

"Could you stand over here?" Afriel asked.

"Why?" I asked.

"You could fall."

"That's what the railings are for. Only humans that want to die, fall off rooftops," I said, looking down at my feet.

“You should focus on helping Hanniah. Her energy isn’t strong enough to safely transport a human body. Isn’t that why he assigned you as her partner?” I asked, tilting my head as I stared at the piled-up snow beneath my feet.

The snow reached the bottom of my calves, and I could feel the coldness of it against my skin. I put the white gloves on and held my neck as I stared down at my body. I began to wonder if their growth would be like a human’s—the nine months. I wondered how long they had been growing inside me. I wondered if they would ruin this body I’ve been living inside of. I wondered what their genders would be. Would they look like me?

I knew that the beings growing inside me would be killed as soon as I stepped through the portal. It’s because I am a fallen angel that Heaven cares so much. Upper-level Demons and Devils can impregnate human women if they choose to do so because of how strong and stable their magic is. I’m neither a woman nor a human, so the circumstances are different.

“I don’t know if I should be angry or happy? Have I really been here for that long to be fooled by a demon?” I whispered as my hands went to my abdomen. “Would I be able to recognize him if he showed up in front of me? I thought I knew them all."

The seven sins make up the seven devils and then there are the ten upper rank demons who make up the demon council. I studied them and I memorized their energy wavelengths. I would’ve noticed. "If Alex had changed the hierarchy of Hell, then he has done horrible things,” I whispered to myself as I rubbed my stomach.

Alex? A Demon? No, no, he’s too sweet and kind.

I saw Afriel looking at me and I pushed my lips together, seeing the particles of the portal begin to form. His hands were hovering over Hanniah’s, and she was focusing all her energy on the portal. She would’ve been struggling had she not had Afriel’s energy to help her.

I-i can't do this. This isn't right, these babies don't deserve this.

"Yahodel, what are you doing?" Afriel asked and I hadn't realized that I was slowly taking steps backward in the snow. "Yahodel," he said softer.

"D-don't call me that! My name is Y-yuki!" I yelled and I felt my back hit the back of the railing. "W-why did you come here?! I was h-happy, h-he makes me happy!"

"Yah--Yuki--."

Let's see if God saves me this time.

Science Fiction Reflection

Science Fiction was the fiction medium that I focused on for this second semester (fall 2025) of creativity in the realm of short stories. The craft book I chose this semester that proved to be immensely helpful in terms of understanding the practice of keeping fiction readers grounded and interesting. *Elements of Fiction Writing: Conflict and Suspense* by James Scott Bell (2011) is one of his many craft books but this one, as the title suggests, focused on conflict and suspense aspects of a novel and how to use them in a fruitful manner. He spilt his book into two sections, conflict and suspense; conflict had twenty-two chapters while suspense had eight. Similar to Janet Burroway's *Writing Fiction* (2019) craft book, all the chapters were wired to give advice on how to format a story.

One of the themes of writing that Bell kept coming back to when discussing conflict is the character's death. He explained that there are three ways a character can die, which I refer to as the 3 P's (Physical, Psychological, and Professional). Physical death is self-explanatory and is one of the most common forms of death in fiction. Psychological death is key to the emotional aspect of a character, it could lead to immense emotional shutdown (e.g., depression, suicide, etc.) or to achieve something that requires emotional interactions (e.g., "if I don't get together with this person, my life will never be right"). Professional death has Bell (2011) explains is the character's "calling in life" (p. 11); not achieving or succeeding at this calling can lead to being homeless without a career or no respect in their field which breeds unhappiness.

For this series that focuses on a child's experiences in danger with clues from their missing mother and how to navigate their uniqueness, the death that I focused more on is psychological and physical. The primary trait of the main character is how they have physically different than your average person which makes them a target (physical) but because of that,

their mental/emotional state and those around them is constantly in danger as well (psychological). Arguably though, for one of the characters their professional death is alluded at the end of the trilogy, so I did use all three forms.

Bell's thorough explanation of how to advance narrative, character's inner and outer conflicts, and how to keep the reader involved encouraged me to play with point of view while weaving information throughout the story to answer 'sub-plots' questions. This idea of weaving information through the narrative is an overarching theme from his discussion, which was especially useful for suspense. Three key suspense elements that I focused on were: scene suspense, paragraph suspense, and cliffhangers (dialogue cliffhangers in particular).

Scene suspense is important because it makes the next blob of information or transition to the next chapter seamless. There always needs to be a logical or emotional reason for a scene to take place which is why I utilized different POVs, and time skips in my writing of science fiction. I was trying to find the most memorable and important information for my characters and the stories--this is a blend of exercises he prompted in the book. Paragraph suspense works in a similar way; paragraphs are the steppingstones for scenes--they are the mode for writing those logical and emotional tensions while connecting them together to make sense.

Cliffhangers is also one of those methods of writing that is common, but Bell breaks them down into types: physical, emotional, In Media Res, and dialogue. For this series, I focused on dialogue cliffhangers; adding questions or thoughts that need answers to in the next scene. I practiced this kind of cliffhanger in this series, using internal thoughts and dialogue; these thoughts often inspired the dialogue, so you don't necessarily know the end of the thought. This idea of the character knowing something but not explaining it out loud for the reader to know is a strategy I picked up from this semester's novel by Richard K Morgan's *Altered Carbon*.

In *Altered Carbon*, Morgan writes in first person, and we see the events unfolding through our anti-hero protagonist, which means that we only get the reveals to mysteries when he thinks the time is right--never before. So, as you will see in the short story series, I tried to implement Morgan's way of continuing plot through only revealing information to other characters when relevant in a few different places. It's probably more obvious in some places than others but it's there.

Moving onto POV, I wrote in third person and first person interchangeably, especially in the trilogy story because I was trying to figure out the best way to illustrate my ideas. While Bell (2011) points out that it's easy to switch POVs in the scenes, I think I did a good job keeping them separate (p. 79). Using first person also allowed me to characterize my sub characters from lead characters in a more personalized manner than the third person. First person allowed for me to use internal thoughts to affect decision--something I didn't use much of in the fantasy stories. I found that first-person also allowed for playing with the information that characters know/don't know but third person allowed me to practice setting.

Setting in this case was more realistic overall than the previous fantasy stories so outlining the setting more explicitly was important here. The realistic aspect also played into the fact that I didn't do much world-building unlike with the fantasy stories; the only building I needed to do was for the characters. Bell's characterization guidance on inner self conflict, dialogue conflict and how to write what drives a character. Compared to last semester, I think I have grown my characterization skills through subtle cues and speech. The plot is what most of my revision consisted of, focusing on Professor Lawhorn's comments and my own understanding of how I wanted the story to sound on paper.

As I've mentioned previously, the science fiction section of my honors thesis--unlike my fantasy and realistic fiction sections--is a series, a trilogy. These three short stories are the foundation for a novel in the future; they operate more as chapters for one book rather than three separate stories. The first story is the prologue and is titled "Escaping, Running: A Race Against Violence." The prologue is the story of the mother of the main character and took the most time and revision because I hadn't envisioned her journey deeply. I hadn't characterized her, and I didn't know what she sounded like, so I had to find her.

The second story is titled "Escaping, Running: A Rather Special Boy" is where I characterize my main character, Yuki, with his grandparents as he gets ready to go on his journey. I wrote it second and while I did know Yuki, I did not know his grandparents. This was a little difficult and where my idealized version of old-fashion Japanese citizens came in--bringing the fiction aspect in more. This story and the prologue had the most setting-based research because I needed to make the travel times (escaping, running) and Japanese regions make logical sense.

The final story is titled "Escaping, Running: Generational Violence" and is the last story making this series a trilogy. Having worked on personality characterization, I focused more on physical attributes in this story which is a personality determiner in it of itself when you don't know much about someone. The setting for the trilogy was more sporadic and but it was where the science aspect was really prominent.

Overall, I think my focus on characterization and building that skill from the fantasy section has pulled through in science fiction and choosing to read Bell and Morgan at the same time was a good decision because Morgan used a lot of the tactics Bell talked about.

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Escaping, Running: A Race Against Violence (The Prologue)

I was an orphan child who had no education aside from the required years of schooling that left me with a high school diploma. Unlike the majority of children in my graduation class, I didn't specialize in any field of study because the options of cram school or college education were out of reach for me. I turned eighteen two months before high school graduation and was homeless because the adoption center needed space for younger and more profitable children.

At the age of twenty-six, I was approached by two members of the Defense Force outside my shabby apartment building outside of Minato City, Tokyo. They told me that they knew although I didn't have a formal background in nuclear biology, that I understood it and proceeded to hand me a thick packet of equations for me to solve. That was the first time I felt needed; but I probably shouldn't have been so eager to answer those questions.

— March 15, 2216 —

Winter was ending and spring was beginning and although I don't know how much time has passed, I was sitting in the back of a military truck, riding on top of bumpy roads. Blindfolded, I could hear the breath of several others around me. The Defense Force had woke me at 0240 and told me that an order from the Prime Minister stated I was to go with them because I was given an opportunity to serve my country.

Six? No, maybe seven. Are they like me or did they get a say in this? Or are they all from the military and I'm the only civilian here?

The truck came to a halt and the body of the person to my left pressed against mine briefly before bouncing back. I could hear the doors of the truck opening to my right and a sudden hotness on my skin before I was pulled to my feet. I was helped out of the truck and for a bunch of military men, they were gentle–or maybe that was my delusion. Moving away from the

trunk, a large and cold hand against my left arm guided me as I walked on damp soil, and paired with the wet smell of Kousa trees, I assumed that we were in a forest. We walked for what seemed like the amount of time I sat in the back of that truck.

When I was finally signaled to stop walking, the cold hand left my arm and ripped the blindfold off my eyes. I shielded my eyes with my left hand as the sun I felt on my skin earlier was directly in front of me.

"Welcome Scientists!" A booming voice that belonged to a gruff and muscular body said in Japanese, but a man who was lankier next to him–both dressed in the camouflage attire of the ground force soldiers translated it into English.

"My name is General Yasunori Morishita and as stated by our Prime Minister and the leader of your home countries, this will be your home until you produce results!" He was yelling while his translator companion was speaking in a monotone and emotionless voice–I didn't know which one was worse.

"You will eat, sleep, and breathe here!" He yelled and I looked around. I saw nothing but acres of forest to my left and in front of me; on the ground were small branches and undisturbed leaves that were drenched in water. In some places, there were still patches of snow and the land dipped in the place where we were standing. Had the sun not been shining, this place would've been cold and empty.

"You won't be able to contact your families, and they won't be able to contact you," he continued, and I secretly looked at the two people I was standing in between; we were in a single line and although I couldn't see past their bodies, I felt alienated because neither one of them were Japanese.

"You won't be able to leave until your project is complete and we will provide you with whatever you need until then!"

The translator stepped back and General Morishita walked into the deepest parts of the dreary and bleak terrain. Two other soldiers were ahead of him, and they bent down in front of a patch of the ground, removing sticks and leaves from the top of it. Within the next couple of seconds, they were pulling a steel door from inside the ground while General Morishita stood next to it.

"Inside," was all his translator said while Morishita was glaring at us.

I didn't move until the person to my left did and I counted six people ahead of her, she was taller than me and had light brown hair and skin color. She didn't look nervous and once her back faced me, I focused more on the door that was leading me to imprisonment indefinitely. I had no idea what I was doing here and why I was chosen to participate in a project that required high-level security. As I stepped on the first of many steep concreted steps, I took another look at the beaming sun before making my way down the dim-lighted opening.

— November 9, 2219; 4:23 PM —

November of 2219, I am twenty-nine and have been stuck in the underground bunker with steel doors and concrete walls for three years. In a group of twenty-one, I am the only informal scientist and the assumed collateral for this project led by the United States, France, and Japan. Scientists of biology, chemistry, and nuclear science from twenty countries (including Japan) were tasked with creating a serum that would turn an ordinary soldier into a superhuman with immunity to disease and poison.

I thought the idea was absurd but no one else did, so I quietly played the assistant role to all the doctorate-accredited scientists. I knew the asymmetrical maze of the bunker better than

anyone because of that reason. There were four labs, one for each field of study placed at the edges of the mazes while the main laboratory where they tested the serum on animals was in the middle. The Defense Force only came to deliver supplies through the only way in or out– that dark hallway, steep staircase, and seven-foot steel doors I walked through three years ago. It is a flawed design and if anything, ever happened to the corridor, we would be stuck inside and essentially buried alive.

I found out after almost a year that we were at the end of the Kofu Forest, a few miles south of Mount Rakanji in the Yamanashi Prefecture. The leaders in charge wanted a place that wasn't easily accessible and had no vantage points, and that was far enough away from a large population in case something went wrong. This is the place I was escaping from.

~

"Ituski," I said in my natural soft Japanese voice, and he turned to look at me before glancing around.

"I told you to call me Dr. Myoga," he responded in English as he lightly slammed the clipboard in his hand onto one of the tables in front of three data input monitors.

Ituski Myoga is the head scientist of the Nuclear Science laboratory. I have a close personal and professional relationship with him. We were standing in front of the controlled experimental enclosure, the one at the center of the bunker. I had come from the southeast corner where they made a dormitory and kitchen. I share a room with three of the other four female scientists. It takes a good five minutes to walk from there to here, through the maze.

He was previously accompanied by the French scientist, Sarah Barbier, the head of the biology laboratory. She's the woman I stood next to during the initiation of our time here and the only woman who isn't in my shared room. I had heard their voices through the door and so I

waited until she left, giving her a courtesy smile as she walked out of the room and ignoring the way she flattened her laboratory coat in the front.

"I'm sorry, I-I have something important to tell you," I said switching to English.

He must be in a bad mood; he usually lets me speak to him in Japanese.

"What is it? The American will be in here shortly," he said as he glanced toward one of the monitors, his voice was distant.

"R-right, well actually there are two things," I said as I folded my hands over my stomach nervously and his dark brown eyes stared at me with a coldness I was used to outside his bedroom; the laboratory heads get their own room.

"Are you going to say it?"

"I think I made progress with the serum last night. I changed the percentage of * in the chromatin remodeling, which focused more on the serum's sequence and not the DNA of the–."

"You were in here without me?" He asked and the anger was prevalent in his voice.

"I- sometimes I can't sleep so I come in here since it's furthest away," I explained, and he walked over to me.

"So? You think you made progress on something–something I haven't, isn't that what you're telling me?" He asked as he towered over me, his eyebrows were knitted together, and his jaw was tightened.

"N-no," I whispered as I looked away from his eyes and down at my hands.

He walked away as I kept my head down and I felt stupid. There was no way he would listen to me, not about science, despite being the only other Japanese person here–he is nicer to the foreigners. He doesn't think I can keep up with complex conversations and is the reason I

became a laboratory assistant, and my ideas aren't taken seriously. But he's so different when we're in his room, he's tender, and his eyes are softer.

"And?"

"I-i'm sorry?" I asked, looking up at him and he had his clipboard in his hand, leaning against the desk.

"What else do you have to say?"

"I-I–," I couldn't get the words out, I was scared of how he would react.

"Aoi!" He yelled in an impatient tone.

"I-I'm p–," as I talked, a loud alarm began to sound which caused me to flinch. "What is that?!" I asked, raising my voice higher than usual as I focused my attention back on Ituski.

His usual stoic and expressionless face had changed to a panicked expression, which enlisted fear in me, and I gripped my stomach. He rushed over to the security monitors for the entire bunker that was stationed in the back of the lab, "there's something wrong at the door," he said in Japanese, and I walked behind him. He blew up the cameras near the bunker doors, sitting down at the black desk chair. "The Defense Force should be there," he said more to himself than me.

Looking over Ituski's slender shoulders at the monitor, they were Japanese men wearing yokai masks with machine guns and visible tattoos along their forearms and necks flooding into the laboratory. Behind them was one of the steel doors hanging off the hinges and two Defense Forces officers lying on the floor. They continued to move across the screen until one of them shot up at the cameras, cutting the live feed.

"Fuck," Ituski whispered before his eyes searched the room, moving rapidly as he took his lab coat off.

"What should we do?"

"Find a way out, it'll take them some time to get down here and I'll go around to the exit while they're torturing the others."

"O-okay," I said as he walked past me, I thought about the news I had to tell him.

If I don't tell him now, who knows if I will ever be able to tell him?

The security camera showed a group of at least ten men infiltrating the lab with machine guns, this was a dangerous situation, and I didn't know what to do. He didn't even give me time to decide because he was quietly walking out the door. The door had closed before I could even ask him what I should do–if it was okay for me to follow him but he left me without a second thought.

"I didn't get to tell him," I said as I clenched the polyester fabric covering my stomach and stared at the lab coat he left behind before my eyes found my secret stash of the twelve vials filled with the serum I was sure worked, "what if it does work and they find it?" I whispered to myself, scared not only for my life now but the world's.

I felt a cramp in my stomach, and I looked down, feeling tears welling up in my eyes and I bit my lip, "you're right. Let's try to get out of here."

Even if it kills me, I have to try.

Escaping, Running: A Rather Special Boy (The Duology)

"Are you sure you want to move to that country?" Sofu asked.

"I think I will like America better and if I don't, I'll just come back home."

"Do you promise? You are always welcome back here as long as we're alive," Sobo said.

"Sobo, don't talk like that," I said.

"We're older than normal guardians."

"Grandparents–you're my grandparents, not my guardians."

"Oh-ho? Just yesterday, we were guardians," Sofu said as we spoke in Japanese.

"I apologized! I was just–," I tried to respond.

"We know," my grandparents cut me off to say in unison. *I really didn't mean to be so rude; I swear I wasn't–you guys don't understand.*

We were standing inside Tokyo's Haneda International Airport, in front of Terminal Three. I was saying goodbye to the two people who had raised me from three months of age. They are two and a half generations older than me, so I call them my grandparents; my Sobo and Sofu. My flight was in two hours, but I wanted to spend time with them at the airport before I checked in and walked down to gate 106A by myself.

Yesterday, in an attempt to get them to understand that I was no longer a child they had to comfort, I hurt them by calling them my guardians. We had no real blood relations because they have no children of their own and my mother left me in their care when I was only three months old. I can still remember the sound of her voice as she left me, the loneliness in her dark brown eyes, and the worry on my grandparents face as she left their house in Nagano.

"Are you sure?" Sobo asked, caressing my left cheek and I could tell from her slightly shaky hand that she didn't want me to go. "Your mother told us to take care of you and I could do that better if you were here."

I don't think that you can, I'm afraid that if I went to school here, the people she ran away from will find me eventually, I can't hide away at home anymore.

"I know, but I got a really good scholarship in California, so I don't have to worry about money."

The constant out casting and labeling is too much, it has affected me more than you know, I want to start over where no one knows me but I'm afraid you won't let me leave if I told you that.

"You don't speak English," my Sofu argued, and I smiled at him.

"I do, I speak it well," I said, switching from the Naganon-Japanese accent I grew up with to a distinctive and strong Northern Californian English accent that I adopted from my high school ESL teacher.

"Huh, look at you, I guess you did pay attention in class," he responded in his natural accusatory tone.

"I'll be okay Sobo, I promise," I said as I took her hand in mine, rubbing the top of it. "I have the money Mama left me if I need it and I researched the culture, so I won't get in any trouble."

If I study genetics then maybe I will finally be able to understand why I am so different from everyone else; my mother was not like me, and I have no idea who my father is or their history. It is not normal to see the individual threads on shirts or hear conversations two-hundred miles away–I need answers that you don't have.

My mother left my parents with ¥3,000,000 which roughly translates to a little under $20,000 when she placed me in their permanent care, my grandparents put the cash in a bank account in ¥1,000 increments until everything was there. I had full access to the account now and I planned on using it for emergencies going forward. My mother never explained where the money came from or where she was running from or where she was leaving to go to. She only gave them my name, Yuki Suzuki and her name, Aoi. The fact that I can remember Aoi as if I saw her yesterday is alarming and I'm not even sure that she knows what she did to me–she shouldn't have left me if she did.

"I don't think you should go."

"He's already here, ain't no sense of him coming back," Sofu grumbled.

"Don't say that! Can't you wait another year? You can come up and work with me at the hotel," Sobo said.

"Sobo," I said softly, letting her hand go to adjust the bookbag strap on my left shoulder. "I'm leaving. I am not leaving you; I am just leaving to get a better education and to learn the things you can't teach me."

Her face went from a subtle sadness to a deep frown and the wrinkles in her face deepened which made my chest sting. I knew that she would make this hard for me, but I felt suffocated in Japan—I have never felt truly happy here, no one but my grandparents has ever embraced me and if I was going to be lonely, I wanted to do it on my terms. It doesn't help that my seventy-year-old grandparents are always looking over their shoulders for me, always suspicious of the people that do talk to me and never letting anyone into our apartment.

"Sobo, are you about to cry?" I asked rushing to grab her hands. "Please don't cry, you're making me feel guilty."

"Kioko, you need to stop that. Let the boy go, he can take care of himself—you know he can," Sofu said, and he sounded annoyed.

"You're just a boy; you don't have to feel this way. Your Mother wanted you to be normal," she said as she held my face and I gently pried her hands off, stepping back to be aligned with my three suitcases.

"If she wanted me to be normal, she wouldn't have made me this way," I said as I grimaced, shaking my head.

I never feel like this is my body, I always feel stuck while my senses take over and make it hard for me to breath. I couldn't even go out in public for long periods of time until I was fourteen, this is not normal.

"She didn't know it would work, she ju—."

"She still injected me! She still chose to force this onto me and because of that e-even though I do remember her, I shouldn't be able to. I'm not normal b-but going abroad to study is what normal people do."

She's always in the back of my mind, singing to me–people don't remember things from when they were infant, it should be impossible.

"He's right, Kioko," Sofu said.

"Oh, hush you, you've always let him go," Sobo argued. "If you would have been stricter with him, he wouldn't be trying to leave us."

"You can't keep a boy like him caged up," Sofu said, and I sighed softly, feeling the wave of anger from last time come over me again. If I kept going back and forth with my grandmother, I would probably miss my flight, and I didn't want that to happen.

"Thank you for raising me and being kind, and patient. I will come back for breaks, but I have to go," I said, no longer willing to drag out my pre-departure meeting with them.

"You have the number of the person to help you?" Sofu asked and I nodded.

I was glad that he wasn't trying to force me to stay, it made it easier. He was always willing to let me explore and find myself, but I could never do it properly. I would miss him the most.

"She's going to meet me at the airport and take me to the dorms to get settled in," I said and the nervousness I felt about leaving started to translate into the nervousness for arriving in the states.

She sounded nice over the phone so hopefully she is nice in person as well.

"You be good to her."

"I will," I said with a soft smile and stepped in front of him before latching my arms around his upper back. "I love you Sofu," I whispered into his chest, and he patted the top of my head, wrapping his right arm around my neck.

"I love you too Yuki," he said, and I felt my eyes blur with hot tears.

I managed not to let any of them fall when I pulled away although a few did roll down my cheeks when I looked at my grandmother who was already crying.

"You're not making this easy for me," I whispered, finding my voice hard to find.

"You don't have to go!" She cried, her small pale hands that were protruding veins in awkward places grabbed my arms and I wanted nothing more than to push her away, but I knew that would only hurt her more.

"Kioko please, do you really want to make this hard? Let him go," Sofu said, peeling her hands off my arms and I sniffled. "Go on Yuki. She'll be fine," he said, and I pushed my lips together as my tears soaked them in salt.

"Sobo, I love you and I'm really sorry." Spit bubbles popped in my mouth as I talked and watching her cry in my grandfather's arms was heartbreaking.

"You do good, that's all we care about. You do good," Sofu said as he put his left hand on top of my head, his right hand holding my grandmother's back.

"Yes," I said, nodding and I wiped my tears, sniffling.

I grabbed the handles of my white hard side suitcases, holding two in my left hand and one in my right, turning my back on my grandparents as I headed towards the check-in counter for United Airlines. I wanted to study Molecular Biology and Genetics and the Universities with the top programs were all in the United States. So, I was getting on a plane to go to Stanford University, but also to find myself–I would consider myself autistic if I didn't know that I tested negative for it five times.

I wanted to study myself to understand who my mother was and why she left me in the care of two strangers while running away from something. I knew that my senses operate a level that is inhuman, and it took me fourteen years to be minimize the exposure to the outside world to the things in front of me. I knew that my mother injected me with a serum twelve times and that it changed my DNA, but I didn't know how much or what else my body could do. While I was hesitant to leave my grandparents at the ripe age of 18, I knew that this was the best course of action for me.

— Time skip: 7 Years Later — 3rd POV:

"Yuki, you are off?"

"Yes. Sobo's your English is getting better."

"It should! You only speak it."

"That's not true, it's just second nature to do outside my apartment."

"What are you doing?"

"I'm climbing the stairs of my apartment complex."

"What?"

Yuki Suzuki, a twenty-five-year-old master's graduate in Human Genetics from Stanford University, who lives in Los Angeles California was talking to his seventy-five-year-old grandmother on the phone. Walking up a modern, twenty-six high-rise condominium complexes with his phone in his right hand as he scrolled through his email, he had his AirPods in as he spoke.

"I'm walking to my apartment, using the stairs," he spoke in Japanese.

"Oh, why are you doing that?" She asked in Japanese.

"Helps me clear my head."

"Is your job stressing you out?"

Kioko Nakamura, Yuki's adopted grandmother was sitting on the corner of her futon as she faced the bedroom door that she shared with her husband. She had just finished her morning chores around the two-bedroom apartment she lived in. It was 6:34 PM in Los Angeles and 10:34 AM in Tokyo, because of the eight-hour time difference so Yuki usually talks to his grandparents after work or before he goes to bed.

"Not more than usual. Oh! Sobo, did I tell you?" Yuki said excitedly, switching back to English as he climbed the sixth staircase.

"Tell me what?"

"I think I have the serum figured o–."

"The boy's gonna be here soon! Why can't you open the damn safe!"

"Do you want to fucking try?"

"Let's just take it!"

"We should've done that in the first place!"

Yuki knew that his brain wanted him to hear that and when he focused on where the voices were coming from he could hear a woman and a man inside his apartment. He could visually see their voices echoing off the walls in his apartment. His apartment was on the eleventh floor and down the hall from the stairwell he was climbing up but his instincts were able to focus and drown out the noise of other people.

"Yuki?"

"Sobo, I'm gonna call you back," Yuki said in Japanese as he swung his black laptop bag off his left shoulder to grab the AirPods case clipped onto the big pouch zipper.

"You okay?! What were you about to say?" Kioko responded in Japanese.

"Yes, I'm okay and I was going to tell you about my research, but I'll tell you about it later."

"Okay, make sure you call me before you fall asleep–I'll be up," Kioko said.

"I will. Talk to you soon," Yuki said before hanging up.

He put his phone in his front left pocket and took his AirPods out, returning them to their respective cases. As he put his bookbag back on correctly, he consciously heightened his senses as he canned the blank wall space inside the stairwell.

"You got it?" The woman's voice asked, and Yuki's eyes flooded with the infrastructure of the building leading up to his apartment, seeing glimpses of the interior of other people's apartments before they focused on the interior of his own.

"Yeah, you see anyone outside?" The man asked and they were in front of Yuki's door.

In his bedroom, his mattress was thrown to the side, and in the gap of his white wooden headboard was a detached piece of wood. The square space was void and Yuki's focus went back to the hand of the man–he had the metal, seventy-pound safe that acted as a cooler; the items inside were dependent on the 25-degree temperature. Yuki's concern was not the breaking and entering the pair had committed, but the fact that they were in possession of the safe planted in the floor.

"No, let's go. Hurry."

Yuki walked up the rest flight of stairs he was at and into the blind spot of the two cameras installed in the stairwell before taking a deep breath, holding his bookbag straps. Yuki began to run up the stairs at approximately 20 mph and when he got to the 11th floor, he stopped running. He exited the stairwell and walked onto the 12th floor before closing his eyes. His ears began filtering through conversations until he zeroed in on the voices of the man and woman.

"Okay let's go," the man said.

Yuki didn't want to let them leave, so he made his way towards his apartment, lessening the exposure of voices as he passed the familiar doors on his floor but within those seconds, he smelled something. There was a Caucasian man behind him wearing thick leather gloves and a black mask that had exited an apartment he walked past.

Down the hall, the door to Yuki's apartment had opened and he saw a tall and muscular heavy Caucasian man holding the very safe that was more important than his life and a tall

Caucasian woman who had an eagle tattoo on her left hand sneakily closing the door behind them. They were both dressed in all black and had black baseball caps on their head with a face mask that covered the bottom of their face.

Yuki didn't pay any mind to the man behind him because he was focused on following the thieves–they were moving to the service elevator, and he moved slowly so they wouldn't see him when they turned to enter. Yuki knew that he could take them in a fight because aside from the martial arts he learned as a hobby when he was in Japan, to keep him from being consumed by loneliness–he had an enhanced physical ability. He has never tested his strength in an extreme way, but he does know that he can fit a normal human with or without weapons.

"Did the Boss text you to drop point?" The man asked as they walked past several apartment doors quickly.

However, before he knew it, an extraordinarily large dose of chloroform (the perpetrator used 50 mL which would've killed a normal person immediately, but Yuki wasn't normal, and his kidnappers suspected that) was being pressed against his face, covering his mouth and nose. Yuki didn't know what was pressed against his face, but he tried to pull off the hand of the person holding the cloth against his face. He used his right hand to yank at the wrist of the perpetrator and used his left hand to try and punch the arm that found its way to his waist, but the chloroform was too strong, and he found his eyes closing as the feeling of his body numbed. He passed out, his body falling against the man behind him who was actively moving his gloves.

"Yeah, apparently it's for that corrupt ass cop," the woman said as the pair reached the service elevator.

Soon, two more men from the apartment came out to join the kidnapping. One of them grabbed his work bookbag while the other took the gloves and the towel, dumping them into a

plastic bag. The man who knocked him out picked him up from his slumped position in bridal style. The man held Yuki's head close to his shoulder and made his way towards the stairwell Yuki had walked out of while the apartment thieves pried open the service elevator doors.

The Kidnappers were heading downstairs to a van that was parked in a garage a block down from where Yuki's apartment was. They wanted Yuki to look sickly and give off a caring aura so they would be able to rush past people without any concern. The van was arranged by Alex Worthington, an FBI operative based in Los Angeles. On the opposite side of the building, the thieves were going down to the apartment's parking garage to a black sedan vehicle that the Boss of the Eastern Black Mafia provided for them.

"What does that cop want with this anyway?" The man asked as they exited the elevator, entering the parking garage and the woman fished for the keys in the jacket she was wearing. It was November in California and the temperature for the Tuesday evening was averaging at 70 degrees; she wasn't wearing the jacket because she was cold but to hide the tattoos on her arms.

"The Boss said something about a government project and how he wants to take it for himself. Worthington is crazier than us," the woman said as she unlocked the doors to the sedan, the kidnappers were exiting the front of Yuki's apartment building.

A minute went by, and the thieves were on the road, on their way to the rendezvous drop-off point in Santa Cruz and unknowingly passed the kidnappers standing at the crosswalk intersection, one of them holding the resident of the apartment they had just broken into.

Escape, Running: Generational Violence (The Trilogy)

Dear Mom,

I think I finally figured it out. It's been seven years since I came to California, and I think I replicated the part of my DNA that was changed due to the serum. I didn't need a twelve dosage like you. Instead, I made it into four doses and it's a thick red color. I remember your serum being blue and I wonder if it turned my eyes blue. Sobo said they were brown until I was five. It was smart of me to join Dr. Reid's lab outside of working as a biomedical manufacturing engineer. I was able to become a U.S. citizen thanks to him and I thought it was better that I have no legal ties to Japan anymore, but they still found me.

I have honed my senses and can expand or limit the exposure whenever I want; I found that I am immune to poison and injected numerous venoms into my bloodstream, but my cells devour them into nothingness in seconds–it's amazing to watch under a microscope. My physical strength has been honed due to my full understanding of the proprioception and Vestibular senses. Being able to manipulate the space around me allowed me to hold the weight of a melting glacier in my hand when I was traveling in Canada, and it felt surreal Momma. I have a photogenic memory and sometimes the movements of others are so slow in my eyes that I feel I have a precognition ability, but I know that isn't true, it's just my vestibular sense projecting onto others.

I have to remember to write this down later–wait am I not writing? Wher–

I felt a pounding pain in my head as my eyes stirred opened. My body felt hot, my wrists and ankles were burning and tight, and I couldn't see anything in front of me as I opened my eyes. I could hear cars honking, trees rustling in the wind, and the sound of feet walking along pavement. I could feel the cold air blowing and touching my skin, the tiny prickles digging into

my wrists and ankles, and the threads of the cloth over my eyes tickling my eyelids. I could smell wet dirt, seven different deodorants, the sap of Big Leaf Maple trees enclosed in the trunks, the body odor of eight different humans, their breath and what they ate for dinner and a squirrel running up a maple tree. There was a lingering, slight sugary sweet taste on my lips and smelling it made me feel lightheaded.

My body was imbalanced, and my core felt strained. I whimpered in pain as I tried to limit my sensory exposure, but I was hyperventilating instead. I tried to focus my eyes first; I wanted to focus on what was beyond the cloth masking them, but I had just been forcefully awakened by a sharp pain in my stomach, and I felt like throwing up. My mouth began to water. I was dehydrated.

Slow down Yuki, slow it down. You've known how to do this for eleven years, just slow. your. attention. down.

I sat up as straight as I could. The hard surface underneath my butt grew increasingly colder as my own body temperature dropped. I needed to ground myself so I could get my breathing under control. What helped me was the hands that grabbed my face, tilting my head so far upward that my neck began to feel strained. The hands were cold, calloused, rough, and just as large as my head; they belonged to one of the people I smelled wearing deodorant and I could tell from the way the air wrapped around their body that this was a taller man, around six feet. He had muscles that were tight and bulging out his body. He balanced himself better than the other seven people I smelled.

"Yuki," he said, and his voice was hoarse and low. He spoke my name with an American accent, and he sounded like a New Yorker; he wasn't the man who knocked me out. He was shorter and was wearing cologne, the man from early didn't smell like anything, he was probably

one of the men not wearing deodorant. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you. I wanted this to be as easy as possible.”

I was panting quietly as he talked, and I closed my eyes as the sound of urban life drained from my ears and the radius of smells my nose reached became shortened to ten feet. I could smell dried up blood emitting from my wrists and ankles. There was a strong stench of concrete and plaster surrounding the perimeter with a low breeze falling in at my feet.

“How bout I remove the blindfold huh? Make you a little more comfortable,” the voice said.

He ripped the blindfold that was covering my eyes, and I turned my head to the left as I tightly shut my eyes. After a couple seconds, I felt his hand on my face again and I blinked rapidly. The bright white light dimmed as I began to focus on the man standing over me. He was white and wearing a pressed navy-blue suit. His face was cleanly shaven, and he had a broad box-like facial structure. He had dark brown hair and muddy brown eyes; he looked sickly and pale.

“Hi Yuki–fuck you’re beautiful. You sure you’re a boy?” He asked as he let my face go and I glanced at the men behind him.

They all had automatic assault rifles strapped to the front of their chest. Three of the seven rested their hands lazily on top as they stood behind him and the other four were further away facing the rusted steel door at the end of the room. I was inside a room inside within an abandoned building from the smell of the rust and dust.

“Who are you?” I asked. My voice sounded hoarse and choppy.

“That’s a good question but I think you have a better one to ask,” he said, and I cleared my throat, feeling the effects of my dehydration.

"Why'd you kidnap me?"

"Well, you have knowledge I want–knowledge others aren't prioritizing," he said.

"K-knowledge about what? I don't know-."

"You do know something. I went down a big ass rabbit hole to find you, the rabbit hole your mother created to protect you," he said, and I pushed my lips together.

"I never knew her so I can't help you."

"Oh, on the contrary. You being obsessed with the unknown is what led me to you. I think whatever's in those vials of yours are proof of that."

What is he—I don't recognize any of the men here. How does he know about the vials? The pair of robbers I saw were moving to a drop point and weren't worried about my presence. Are they working together?

"I make study living organisms and their DNA for a living. I don't know which one you're referring to."

"You will," he said as he waved over one of the men.

The man closest to him stepped forward and handed him a flat steel box. The man interrogating me opened it and I saw a thick syringe inside which made me shiver. I widened my eyes and pushed my lips together as my heart begin to race again.

"W-what are you going to do with that?" I asked as I began pulling my wrists away from each other; the burning sensation increasing as the fibers dug deeper into my skin.

"Well, if the vials you hid in your apartment isn't what I'm looking for, I need to get it straight from the source. That's the thing about working with others, it makes the job easier," he explained as he picked up the empty syringe.

The syringe had three rings, a long nose, and a thick metal body. I've never seen one in person, but these were the syringes people used before the world started relying on plastic. His lackey handed off the box to his closest colleague and walked behind me. When I woke up, I no longer had on my black puffer jacket and now, thanks to the aggressive action by an armed man, my long sleeve button down shirt was hanging over the ropes tying my wrists together.

"You just got more attractive I have to say. I didn't really need to do that since I'm going for your neck, but I didn't want to get your little white shirt dirty."

He likes talking.

"I-i don't have anything you want. Are you going to kill me?"

"Not immediately, but I have to make sure you're the real deal first."

"I don't understand," I said as the man behind me pulled my head to the side with his left hand.

He had a tight grip on my hair, and he planted his right hand on my shoulder as his boss positioned himself in between my legs. His eyes ran against my half naked body. My neck was beginning to feel sore from the unnecessary pressure his muscle-brain lackey was putting on it.

"She made you into a super soldier."

I'm not soldier. I've never even killed anyone before--will I have to kill him to get out of here? Can I even do that?

"But in your case with your physique, a super spy at best. Soldiers are supposed to be fit and muscular. If the serum is that good, that it doesn't need to change the physique to be efficient, do you know how much money I can make off you? I can't kill you until I know if you'll be my money maker or not."

He knows. He knows more than I thought.

He didn't just kidnap me; he was trying to confirm his theory. He didn't just go down a rabbit hole, he dug up history that I don't even have access to–he knew about my mother, who I know nothing about. He was different than the duo at my apartment who didn't see the significance of the vials. He probably hired them just like he hired these men. He was someone with power. Someone who could access government secrets, a corrupt cop. I scanned his body and noticed that there was something protruding against his blazer jacket--it was a badge.

He's–

"Worthington," I whispered as the metal syringe penetrated my skin and he must've heard me because he stopped pushing it.

"What'd you say beauty?" He asked as he pulled the syringe out my neck and I could feel the blood rising out of my body, a small line trickling down to my chest.

"That's your name, isn't it?" I asked and he nodded towards muscle-brain who let go of my body.

"How'd you know that? Do you have x-ray vision?" He asked and I could feel the tissue cells of the Dermis connecting, and my blood vessels restoring inside my body.

He's not just some gang leader, if he works for the government then I have to kill him. He's going to turn me into an experiment.

"What if I just help you make whatever it is you want? I'm really goo-."

"No, I have what I want," he said as he tilted my chin, his eyes focusing on my neck and his stoic face filled itself greed and satisfaction as he grinned. "You fucking healed, just like that. Is that easy, tell me huh?"

I have to kill him. You have to Yuki. You need to think logically, not emotionally. Them or you.

"No, it's a process. I really don't like needles," I said honestly.

I knew that I couldn't let him stick me again and that I couldn't stay here. I also couldn't let him walk out of this knowing his suspicions were true. My mother left me at three months of age after injecting me with a serum. She probably died at the hands of the Yakuza mafia or some international gang and now, I would be subjected to the same fate in America if I didn't kill them first.

X-ray vision? Yes. My senses are heightened, and I can manipulate the range of what I can hear, see, taste, touch, or smell; it would've made soldiers in combat untouchable by their enemies. I have incredibly vestibular and proprioception senses; I know exactly how my body moves, and it allows me to read other people's. Up until I was twelve, I had no control of what I saw, and I was always in sensory overload. Now, I have mastered my exposure levels and can change them at will--like how I did when I woke up from being knocked out.

Getting the ropes off of my wrists and ankles would only take me a second, and I would want to take them with me since my blood was covering them. Realistically taking his men down would be a little difficult because I've never used a gun before, but I did take up mixed martial arts during my university years in California.

Learning the extent of my powers and using the spiritual essence and mediation, I learned how to manipulate the air around my body, to make things lighter to me so I don't have rely on my own strength. I could take them in a fight and inflict deadly damage, but I also didn't want to have bullets in my body as I tried.

I should just shoot them before they shoot me–he knows I can heal my own wounds, so they'll probably shoot me to keep me grounded but not kill me. I don't want to go through that torture.

He was no longer being cautious around me, as I thought about the action I should take, he had two of the men hold me down while his own hand was against the right side of my face. I used the fact that my hands were covered by my shirt to rip the rope with quickness that didn't make a sound and as he got ready to stick me again, I closed my eyes. There was a man holding my hair and shoulder, and one holding my arms, pressing his own against my thighs to ground me–he would go first.

The syringe snapped inside my neck as I lunged at the man kneeling in front of me, his head snapping as I twisted it. The shirt dropped from my wrists and the rope hit the floor in front of me. Worthington was in the process of stumbling back and I took the syringe out of my neck, flipped the man behind me, and using the metal stick to stab him in his heart–it was at least four inches long, it was deep enough. Worthington hit the floor when I broke my legs free and rolled over the man choking on his own blood.

I laid down on the cold floor beneath me and mimicked the way snipers position themselves, using the man's body as an anchor for the rifle. With Worthington on the ground, it was easier for me to aim at the other five men in the room, who's movements were predictable to read. They were slow, cinematically slow and I was the one editing the camera footage. One, two, three, four, five–the blowback from using the rifle was stronger than I expected but it felt like someone was throwing a small rock at me.

As their bodies slowly hit the ground, I widened my senses' range. There weren't any more men nearby, but there were four SUVs driving on the dented forest roads, they were all dressed the same and had bulletproof vests on. The one that stood out to me was in the last car and he had on a black button down and jeans with a badge above his left front pocket.

FBI.

"You're with the FBI? You're not just a cop, you're an Agent," I said as I dropped the dead body and the gun I was holding.

"W-what? Jesus fuck, how did you–."

I grabbed my shirt and put it on as he began to get up, the shock of the situation dissolving in his mind. Once I had it fully buttoned, I grabbed the gun that was covered in my DNA and placed the strap on my left shoulder. I grabbed the syringe stick out of the dead man's chest, a small squirt of blood ejecting as I did so. I grabbed the bloody ropes, my wrists fully healed and walked over to Worthington who had just placed his head on a rifle hanging above one of his lackey's head. I kicked his back, causing him to fall on top of the body before kicking his head, watching him roll onto the ground, cursing.

"Where's my stuff Worthington?"

"Fuck, fu-AGH!" One bullet in his stomach. I wasn't sure how many bullets an assault rifle had but I was down six.

"I have to kill you because I don't know if hitting you hard enough will give you amnesia, so I need you to tell me where it is before I do that," I whispered as I crouched over him. "Where is it?" I asked.

"F-fuck, they dumped it somewhere. I didn't ask."

"That's unfortunate. My laptop had a lot of important information on there, not to mention my phone. My grandparents are probably freaking out right now. I'm really sorry about this," I said.

"W-wait, wait, I wasn't going to kill you, and my ass is on the line here, so I won't say anything if you don't."

"You should've thought about that before you implied you were going to rape me."

"WA-." Headshot.

I have to get out of here. They're coming from the west and there are no car tracks going east–I should be able to get out of the forest if I go east.

"I can take the gun apart and bury it is as I go, the ropes too. I wish I knew where they put my phone," I said as I stepped over Worthington's dead body and I kicked the door open, watching it hit the other side of the building. I couldn't leave any more fingerprints or evidence that I was here, so I turned around and emptied the rest of the bullets inside the room, spraying it with ammunition as the cars got closer.

I surveyed the building one last time before running towards the exit closest to the east side of the building.

Mom, I killed people.

Sofu, I don't think I'll be able to sleep tonight.

Realistic Fiction Reflection

In the final semester (spring 2025) of my honors thesis, I did not learn from a new craft book but really focused on practicing the tips and skills I learned throughout. From Spring 2024 with Janet Burroway's book—I really focused on characterization through scenes but particularly through dialogue. This semester had a progressively age group from seventeen to thirty-two so I tried to imagine the problems that a high schooler, college student, and a career centered person would have.

For "We're Not Alike," I focused on a teenager who is in a rift between her friends, family, and personal feelings. Most high school confrontations happen in hallways or the lunchroom, so I set the scenes in those places. For "Upfront and Running," I set the scene in a college dormitory with the backdrop of studying versus having fun and/or making decisions while intoxicated. This story focuses on pair of college seniors and their relationship complexity. Lastly, for "Dinner with Friends v. Fiancé," for a group of people in and/or near their thirties, topics of career and marriage are at the foreground.

Each story focuses on human complexity when it comes to relationships and how gender identity and sexuality can affect those relationships. Part of that complexity is knowing what happened in the past, and as Burroway suggests, having memories explains the context of the current drama. Compared to the past two genres, the first draft of each story for Realistic Fiction didn't have scenes that give insight to the confrontation of the present. For "We're Not Alike," I chose to implement more inter dialogue to explain the past but for the draft here, I included one extra scene for the decision of the sleepover. As I work on it in the future, it will have a scene of discovery of what happened at the sleepover.

The same thing applies for the second story, “Upfront and Running,” the implementation of the short dialogue in between the recounting of a drunken night was more for revealing feelings and characterization then it was for revealing the events that unfolded. In the next drafts, I will move towards a point of view switch so we can see Casimir’s side of things leading up to going to Elias’s dormitory. In contrast to the other two stories, “Dinner with Friends v. Fiancé,” there is no significant past memory. Instead, this story is provided as a new way to look at a relationship (namely between Yuki and Aaliyah) that makes the past irrelevant. To combine the future renditions, for this story I think having Aaliyah’s point of view as she realizes that her own emotional response has led to her losing *another* friendship and trying to mend it healthily.

Despite not picking up a new craft book, I did pick up a realistic fiction novel for this semester; I had the pleasure of reading *Giovanni’s Room* by James Baldwin for the first time and it is what inspired the direction my stories took. I had read two fiction novels prior to the start of this semester, both focused on male homosexuality and they brought up Baldwin’s novel, so I knew I had to read it. In Baldwin’s novel, place and identity are central themes. The main character, David, arguably ends up falling in love with two people at the same time, who are of the opposite gender which would make him bisexual in more terms. However, for David (and Queer folk like Baldwin at the time), there was no such thing as bisexuality, so his main conflict is his own emotions.

James Scott Bell’s craft book that I read during the fall was also in the back of my mind as I wrote and read Baldwin. This idea of inner self v. inner self conflict that David had, and Bell explains is most prevalent in my first two stories. Bell’s discussion of how to use suspense (cliffhangers) in stories, like last semester, was the most practiced for this semester. For Jasmine in “We’re Not Alike,” she faces the same sexuality crisis as David except she’s not actively in a

relationship while she does so. This self v. self conflict is rooted in trying to figure out what path she should follow when it comes to the attraction of another girl, friends or something more. If Bell were to pick, the ending of the first story is an emotional cliffhanger that leaves suspense for what is to come. For Elias in "Upfront and Running," he is similar to David's in terms of understanding of his sexuality. Elias knows what his attraction to Casimir means and knows the boundaries he's placed on Casimir, but he isn't ready to admit to out loud; again, demonstrating this conflict of self v. self. For this story, I used an inner dialogue cliffhanger that insinuates a physical one. For Yuki in "Dinner with Friends v. Fiancé," there is no self v. self conflict, rather it's self v. another person. In this story, the dialogue is also being used as the cliffhanger, and we don't see a *real* resolution.

Baldwin also spends a lot of time describing the places David is in (Paris v. the United States, Giovanni's Room, the bars, the rented house) and through those descriptions come his emotional responses. As I mentioned early, for the first story rooting the conflict in hallways and the lunchroom was essential to the story, however I didn't really explain the setting in the first draft. In this draft, I did add more to describe the hallways, but I could do more especially when adding the emotions involved with the sleepover set-up. For the second story, I did spend a little more detail but didn't layout the dormitory explicitly which is modeled after the University of California, Berkeley single rooms. For the third story, the only concrete details like within the seating positions and the name of the restaurant in New York City but nothing else.

The future inclusion of scenes and more context was feedback I received from Professor Lawhorn and Nick Rush with whom I workshopped the stories with. While I was focused more on what the characters sounded like (and looked like by the third story), they helped me realize that I had missed specifications on context and tone. The experience of writing these stories and

hearing their feedback has further instilled in me how important it is to write down everything I know about the stories and worry about the formatting and placement of the details later.

Overall, I think I have improved on characterization and have utilized many aspects of writing throughout the fictional journey I've been on but from this point forward, I have to combine and evenly distribute the concepts. This includes reading more and always having a someone respond to my work.

--

We're Not Alike

There's something wrong with Zara. She's been acting–weird. It doesn't sound nice when I put it like that, but that's the only nice word I can think of. I know that her big love language is physical touch, and she likes hugs–she hugs me whenever she sees me–but her hugs have felt a little more personal and less platonic. We have a mutual friend, Jermaine, and maybe it's because he's a boy and I'm not, but she never hugs him like she's started to hug me. She also never wants to let go and beginning two weeks ago, she's done it when I'm talking to other girls which I can tell makes them uncomfortable, but I don't want to be rude and push her off. So yeah, she's being weird.

—

"Are you on your period?" I asked as I closed my locker.

"What?"

"Are you?" I asked as I turned around, moving towards the direction of the far end of the hallway. It was third period and luckily for me my first four classes are on the second floor where my locker is, so I always go back in between classes so I'm not carrying multiple binders.

"No, I'm not. Why you asking?"

"Then did something happen?"

"Something like what?"

"Something to make you more, um, I guess touchy than usual?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Zara."

"Jasmine," she said as we started walking down the hall; we have all but two classes together this year and compared to last year, I definitely see her more. That could be why I feel

like her hugs have been more frequent, but there's something sensual about them that makes it weird. She used to hug me around my neck but now she puts her hands on my waist and sometimes wraps her arms around my back.

"You've been hugging me for like minutes at a time. Hugs are supposed to be short unless you need comfort for something."

"I can't hug you? You didn't care when we were at my place," she said, and I looked at her with my left eyebrow and side of my lips raised.

"What are you talking about?" I asked as I stopped walking and she put her hands on my forearms, pushing me towards one of the intersecting walls of the hallway.

I usually think of the hallways as an e-shape with two main intersections where the stairwells are and a mid-section; we were in the mid-section. There were people walking behind us and they passed as her hands left my body and I felt that weird tingly sensation burning through my clothes in the places she touched; she was weirding me out.

"Jas," she exasperated as her eyebrows furrowed. "I thought–."

"You thought what?" I asked, glancing up at the mounted digital clock above us that read: January 28 9:22 AM. Class started in three minutes, and she was holding me up. I wanted to talk about how she was acting but I also hate being late.

"I thought that we were becoming more."

"More than what?"

"Friends," she said, and I tilted my head as I stared down at her.

"More than friends? What does that even mean? Why would you think I–."

"You know exactly what it means! Anybody would think that!" She whisper-yelled, looking around at the other students who were walking past us. At least she knew she was being

weird. Only people in the wrong are conscious about their surroundings when talking to someone else. “Y-you actually agreeing to spend a night when I’ve been trying for almost two years. Us watching *Teen Wolf* that close, underneath the covers, in my bed, you in my clothes. Taking those weed brownies together and you telling me all that stuff about your stuck-up family. You telling me that you trusted me more than anyone and didn’t want me to leave you. What did all that mean to you?!”

—— Friday, January 17 at 3:56 PM ——

“Hey, are you going to see the new Marvel movie?” Zara asked Jermaine as we descended the stairs from the third floor where Zara's locker is.

“Am I going to see it? What kind of question is that?” He asked laughing. “And it's not just any Marvel movie. It's the last great one they're going to have.”

“Isn't that supposed to be Endgame? I thought it was coming out next year?”

“I'm not going to see that sad shit. Superhero finales are always sad, I guarantee you one of the original six is going to die.”

“What movie are you talking about?” I asked as we reached the platform connecting the third and second flight of stairs.

“It's *Avengers: Infinity War*. This is when all the legends come to play,” Jermaine explained as we started down the second flight.

“Legends?”

“The only black marvel characters are finally getting mainstreamed--so yeah, legends.”

“Isn't Storm apart of Marvel?”

“Uh storming is about all she can do. Wakandians can fight good as fuck.”

“Storm?” I asked.

“From DC,” the two of them said together. “Storm was played by Halle Berry,” Zara continued.

“She's fine as fuck but she ain't no fighter.”

“Let me know when you go so I can come," Zara said and I bit my lip.

“Jas, once they all come out we can watch them together,” Jermaine said.

“Yeah, we'll be in college then and out your parents sight,” Zara agreed.

“It's okay,” I said softly. “You talk about it so I can imagine it.”

“It's not the same,” Jermaine said as we continuously walked, eventually reaching the bottom of the staircase. “Well, I'll see y'all on Monday.”

“Okay bye,” I said as he walked towards the double door leading directly to the student parking lot.

“Before you watch any Marvel shit, you have to see *Teen Wolf*,” she said as we started walking towards the hallway from the stairwell corridor. Zara and I take the bus, we take different ones because we live in different neighborhoods, but we always walk to the load station together.

“Yes, yes, I know. Your favorite show.”

“It's a lot of people's favorite show. Dylan O'Brien is successfully the only white boy I think I'd ever be in comfortable around.”

“Successfully?”

“He passed the test.”

“You mean his character did.”

“He acts woman trustworthy in most of his roles--not that I care about that necessarily. If they made a more diverse cast besides the one black dude, it would be more fire than it already is,” she said, and I was about to respond but then I felt my phone vibrating in my pocket.

I pulled my phone from out of my black left coat pocket and saw that my mother was calling me. I was surprised and scared at the same time; she rarely ever calls me.

“What's up?” Zara asked, glancing at my phone.

“It's my mom,” I said, and her eyebrows furrowed.

“Oh,” she said as we continued to walk.

“Hello?” I asked after sliding the white icon across the bar and putting the phone up to my left ear.

“Jasmine, you're out of school now right?” She asked and her voice sounded unusually strained, like she had been yelling before she called.

“Yes, I'm walking to the bus. Is something wrong?”

“Nothing a child needs to worry about. I don't want you coming home tonight and I already told your siblings, do you have a friend's you can stay at?”

“You mean to like sleep over?”

“**That's what I said isn't it? If not, ask your sister if you go with her.”**

“So, I can sleep over some's house?”

“A girl's house. One that doesn't have any brothers. If you understand, text me the name and address of the friend, I'll bring you some things you need later on.”

“Mom-,” I started to say but she hung up on me.

“What was that?” Zara asked as I stopped walking.

“My mom, she said I couldn't come home,” I explained as Zara pulled me towards the wall, out of the way of other people walking. “And that I could stay over someone's house or wherever my sister.”

“Are you for real?!” She asked with wide eyes.

“Yeah,” I said as I nodded. “Yeah I think I am.”

“You can just stay over mine's then!”

“What? Don't you have to ask first?”

“I can ask on the bus, but she isn't going to say no. C'mon, we have to hurry before we miss the bus,” she said, pulling me down the hallway and while she was beaming with joy, I was shocked.

I'm turning eighteen in March and being the youngest of five, I have never been allowed to spend the night over someone else's house. Family members and friends alike, none of my siblings could do that, it was guaranteed to piss our parents off we asked. Yet on a random Friday, my mother who sounded anger but also distressed, who usually let my father do all the talking, granted me permission sporadically? It felt wrong but Zara seemed excited and part of me was to.

“Are you going to make me watch *Teen Wolf*?” I asked, shrugging her hand off my wrist so I could walk next to her instead of behind her.

“Hella yeah.”

___

Weird. How weird is it for two people to experience the same events but see them differently? She was there when my mother told me I could spend a night, it's not like I brought it up myself. I wasn’t allowed to watch supernatural tv shows at home, but I knew that she

always wanted me to watch *Teen Wolf*, so I suggested we do that. I wore her clothes because my mother didn't end up dropping a change of clothes for me to wear until the next morning. And how else were you supposed to watch tv in a bedroom– on the floor? The floor is cold and uncomfortable. Zara made her bed warm and comfortable and her obsession with physical touch rubbed off on me briefly. I told her more than I've told any of my other friends was partially because of the high I was experiencing; it was the first time for me, and I couldn't stop myself. Although part of me only opened up so much because I did trust her. I trusted her and practically loved her, but she was being weird.

"I think you're confused," I said after what felt like hours of me contemplating and reviewing that night.

"No. I think you're corrupted by your outdated family."

"You always do this! Not everybody thinks like you! I just want to have a best friend, not whatever it is you think I was trying to do, but I can't even do that because you read into everything. Stop being a weirdo!" I said and I watched her eyes widen before they flashed with obvious sadness, and she pushed her lips together. "I-i didn't mean that," I whispered, and she shook her head.

"No, you definitely did. I thought you were different, but you're not, you're just like them so I guess you're right, we're not alike."

"Zara, I-i'm sorry. I just–you were acting like I was trying to-."

"No. Forget it. Since I'm a fucking weirdo, don't talk to me," she said before she walked away and began blending in the with the crowd of other students walking to their next class.

My eyes went to my feet, staring at the short ankle UGG boots I had on as I brought my two-inch binder and statistics textbook that were lazily sitting on my left forearm to touch my

chest as I folded my arms. The weirdness I felt had traveled into my chest and grew nastily. It made me feel like shit, if I apologized and she forgave me, I knew it would go away. I preferred the other weirdness Zara made me feel. It was scary but not like this. It was subtle and made my heart race and my thoughts cloudy, but this one made me feel sick to my stomach.

"Ms. Waltkins, you need to be heading to class not standing here."

"Yeah I'm going," I said, slowly as I looked up.

"Is everything okay?" Mrs. Bennett asked; she was one of the senior and AP math teachers. I have AP Statistics with her first period, and I hate the concepts, but since she's a nice teacher, I find it bearable.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I said before walking away from the wall I was in front of.

I walked into my Global History class after dragging my feet; I walked in as the bell rang and I glanced at Zara as I walked to my assigned seat. In Mr. Reed's classes, he has assigned seats and although he'd never say it out loud, he puts the more active students in the front and the non-active ones in the back. He considers Zara non-active but I know that she just doesn't like school, not that she's too lazy or dumb, but today I was glad I could have my back towards her.

"It's only Tuesday and it's only third period. Why did I bring it up now?" I whispered to myself as I sat down at my seat, letting my school supplies fall onto the desk. "Why couldn't I have waited?"

—

"Hey, what's up with you and Zara?" Jermaine asked as he sat down next to me.

It was lunchtime, our fifth period, and I usually sit with Zara, Jermaine, and some of his other friends but because of what happened earlier, I decided to sit by myself in a corner. It was closer to the west exit door than usual, and I was still feeling conflicted.

"What do you mean?"

"Don't give me that shit. She's ignoring you ain't she? What you do?"

"Why do you assume I'm the one in the wrong?" I asked, turning left to look at him, dropping the plastic fork in my hand against the plastic tray that was in front of me.

I usually just get a salad for lunch because they have a self-serving bar and even though it's been ten minutes since I sat down (fifteen for lunch in general), I had only taken a couple of bites.

"Because you're always stuck in your head and blurt shit out when you're overwhelmed," he said and I sighed, pushing my lips together.

"Do I really do that?"

"Yeah, you got to be on the spectrum or something–or maybe it's because you can't think in that fucked up house of yours."

"Why does everyone think my house is crazy or something?!"

"Is that why y'all not talking?"

"No," I whispered sadly.

"So?" He asked, opening his hands as he shrugged.

"I-i called her a weirdo."

"That's it?" He asked, chuckling. "She is fucking weird. You are too, weirder in my opinion."

"It's more complicated than that."

"That's because you make everything complicated. One of these days, you're really going to fucking explode."

"I don't make everything complicated."

"Yeah, you do. You try to please your stuck-up parents and your friends who operate on a completely different playing field. You're always making up excuses emotionally and that's why you get overwhelmed. I honestly never thought you'd have any friends until Zara start dragging you around."

"Is that really how you see me?"

"That's how everyone sees you," he said, nodding. "I would've start smoking weed a lot younger if I had your parents. Anyway, so what you called her weird–what else did you say?"

"That was it! I told her that I can't think of things like she does and that she's a weirdo."

"I don't get why she's pissed but okay. You gon apologize or are y'all just gon act like this for the rest of the year?"

"I did try but she told me not to talk to her."

"Right, well, no offense, but unless you said, 'I'm sorry,' it doesn't really count as an apology. Even I know that shit."

"Why are you suddenly acting like you know everything?! You were just into it with your girlfriend last week because you went to the movies without her!"

"Yeah but y'all aren't in a rela-oh," he said with wide eyes.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"What do you mean nothing? Why did you say 'oh' like that."

"Nothing, nothing. I'm gonna go talk to Zara, see if she's willing to talk to you yet," he said as he got up.

"Wha-don't do that. Jermaine!" I yelled as he walked away from the lunch table I was sitting at, leaving me alone again.

My parents' strictness did make it hard for me to keep friendships and Jermaine is the only other person besides Zara that I talk to on my own. I knew that properly apologizing to Zara was the only way I would get her to talk to me, but I wasn’t ready to finish our conversation or understand her implications of our relationship. I wanted us to stay friends because that’s all we could be and if I could only see her that way in my memories, then so be it. This kind of hurt was better.

Upfront and Running

"—with that, right? Haha."

"This is so annoying. What time is it?" I asked out loud as I tapped my phone screen.

The pitch blackness was replaced with the large album visual of Lauryn Hill's *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* with the white progress bar at 5:04. There was still sixteen seconds left of the song "*Doo Wop (That Thing)*," but I was more focused on the white bolded letters above the album cover. It was 1:23 in the morning and I was still up doing my chemistry class homework; glad that it wasn't due yesterday at 11:59 PM.

"Ah, what the fuck?! It's already one. I'm going to kill myself," I said as I covered my face.

I felt like screaming, but having my Homepod speaker on low was already enough for someone living next to me to complain about. I've been sitting at my desk in my dorm room since 10 PM, when I left the Biomedical Library because I didn't want to stay until they actually closed at midnight. I've been working on the same fucking assignment and I still had three questions to go. I knew I wouldn't get any real sleep considering I have a 9 AM class, but I wanted to finish this and not leave it for later.

"Mmm, uh, mmm, yeah, mmm, yeah, yeah, yeah. Mmm, uh, mmm, yeah, mmm—."

"Let's go until 2:30, then I'll shower. That way I can sleep until 8:30 and get up for class. That makes sense," I said as I unlocked my phone and went to the clock app on my iPhone.

I set an alarm for 2:30 AM and then one for 8:30 AM as Mario sang "*Let Me Love You*" a couple inches away from me. I clocked my phone and turned it face down so my notifications wouldn't distract me and stared at the open textbook and notebook in front of me. It would be so much easier if I didn't have to show my work by uploading pictures because I could solve it the

way I wanted to. The first time I uploaded an assignment with my own style and not the professor's two years ago, he gave me an F and told me to do it over and that I was somehow cheating. He's a 'work harder not smarter' professor and I hate that because I'm always up late doing his assignments.

"I'm really going to have a mental fucking break down and it's only the beginning of October," I said, as I ran my pencil over the problem I was working on.

"You know that they're all lies."

The only thing keeping me grounded was my R&B playlist. It was calm enough not to distract me and I didn't need to have it loud which works for my late night studying. I went through seven more songs, and I was finishing up my last problem when my Siri started talking through my speaker which startled me.

"Carter (Sigma Phi Epsilon) is calling. Do you want to answer the call?"

I picked up my phone and saw in the upper left corner that it was 2:15. I sighed loudly. I answered the call and put my phone on speaker, disconnecting it from the Homepod.

"Hello?"

"Is Casimir with you?"

"What?"

"So, he's not?"

"He told me that he was hanging out with you and some other guys from other frats. Why would he be with me?"

"Did he call you?"

"No? Did something happen?" I asked, confused and Carter sighed.

“One of the Alpha’s said some shit that pissed him off and he kept running his mouth, so they got into it. Cas beat his ass, and then somebody else, almost swung on me and then he left. We just calmed down and kicked everybody out, but he got his phone on DnD and ain’t answering. Thought he was with you.”

“Oh. Is he okay? Is he hurt?”

“Who?”

“Casimir,” I said, and he laughed.

“Fuck, yeah, I don’t even think he got hit. He’s just pissed as fuck, and I had to damage control.”

“What did the guy say?” I asked and he didn’t respond. “Carter?”

“Some people just don’t know when to stop talking, that’s all I’ll say. You gon call him?”

“You said his phone was on Do Not Disturb.”

“Like that’s ever applied to you.”

“How do you know that it doesn’t?” I asked.

I knew that it didn't. When Casimir (the person in question) and I got close during freshman year, I watched him select me as the only person who could bypass his do not disturb notifications. His family isn't on the allowed list even though they have a good relationship; just me.

“Because his phone is always on DnD. Look if he didn’t call you, I’d say leave him alone. He’s probably still pissed off.”

“Okay.”

“I’m finna crash, but if you do see him, tell him he’s got a target on his back and he needs to fix this shit,” he said before hanging up and “*All My Life*” by K-Ci & Jojo started playing through my Homepod speaker.

He got into a fight? Carter made it seem like it was one-sided. Agh, I just wanted to finish my work. For fucks sake Cassie.

I groaned as I stopped playing my music and paused my Homepod before unlocking my phone. I went to the phone app and scanned the log until I found Casimir’s contact name: Cassie 🫠 and clicked on it. I put my feet up against the edge of my desk chair and put the call on speaker, staring at the mirror picture of me and him on the night he forced me to go out with him between the call controls.

It was my first time in the Sigma Phi Epsilon house and the night of his probate; he was the solo line during the fall of our sophomore year and his Fraternity threw a big house party for him. We were obviously very drunk in the picture from how dilated our pupils were. I had the phone at my chest and was staring directly into the mirror and he was behind me. He had his hands on the sink counter in front of me, leaning down to put our heads at the same height and he was looking at me through the mirror. I remember almost nothing from that night because it was the first time I had drank alcohol and I drank entirely too much.

When I found the picture and several others like it in my camera roll the next day, I was shocked because I didn’t think I was coherent enough to use my phone. The headache I had lasted for three days, and I didn’t even talk to him during those days, but when I did, he made that picture his contact photo and sent the photos to himself and chose a different one for my contact.

The phone rang twice before he picked up and it was eerily silent on his end. A minute went by before I asked, “Cassie?”

“Yeah?” He asked and his normally husky voice sounded hoarse and airy.

“Where are you?” I asked, turning my phone volume up.

“Somewhere.”

“Carter told me you got into a fight and then disappeared.”

“It wasn’t a fight.”

“Where are you? Should I come there?”

“How the fuck are you going to do that?” He asked and I could hear his anger now. **“It’s 2 AM, Elias. What are you going to do? Get on the bus and walk until you see my car? Get in an uber without a real fucking address? Don’t be fucking st-haa fuck me,”** he said, and I pushed my lips together.

Strangely, I didn’t feel hurt by him cursing me out or attempting to call me stupid. I knew that he wasn’t angry with me, and I knew that when he does get angry with me, he’s more calm, not aggressive. He's always careful with me, careful not to hurt my feelings even if his are.

“I’ll come to you,” he said after a couple seconds of silence between us.

“Carter thought you were already with me. What exactly happened? Why would he think you were with me?”

“I’m always with you. I get everything out of the way so I can be with you.”

“I thought you put him on allowed for your settings.”

“I didn't.”

“He's your friend."

“He's my frat brother and he's always on bullshit when he calls me. You’re my closest friend and I don’t mind you calling me on bullshit.”

“I’m your closest adult friend. You have childhood friends.”

“I’m not close with anybody except you. The rest of that shit is mostly appearances, trying to conceal my violent tendencies.”

“I didn’t think you could be violent. You had the perfect childhood.”

“My mother thinks I’m psychotic and tried to lock me up the summer before I came here.”

“How can I be the closest friend you have if I never knew that?”

“You tend to run away from me a lot as it is and I don’t want that to happen permanently,” he said.

I sighed. “That’s not true,” I whispered.

“Yes it is. You wouldn’t join Sigma Phi with me.”

“Greek Life is just a stupidly large cult.”

“When our conversations get too deep, you always change the subject.”

“T-that’s normal! S-sometimes you ask me non-friend like things a-and it makes me uncomfortable.”

“When I start fucking someone, you avoid me.”

“I don’t avoid you, but you should spend time with the person you’re dating. You already do so much so I just think more time should go to them.”

“I don’t do anything.”

“Stop lying! You’re the President of your frat, you run track, and you play baseball, you’re always going to your college’s events and are at least three other clubs, and you have a

job. I don't know how you have time for homework, and then spending your free time with me when you have a partner is rude."

"I want you though."

"Are you driving?"

"And there's the subject change."

"Are you?"

"Yeah I am."

"Well don't talk to me and drive, you're already drunk and upset."

"I'm not drunk."

"Just text me when you're here so I can let you up."

"I'm really not in the mood to have you push me away. It's why I didn't come to you in the first place."

"I won't push you away."

"Elias."

"Cassie," I whispered.

I heard him sigh. I knew it would get to him, I knew because it's the nickname I gave him. At first it was to just make fun of him by calling him a girl's name, something he said used to happen in elementary school but now it's become a special nickname. I'm the only person he lets call him that so I knew he would fold if I said it.

"Fuck. I'll be there in thirty minutes."

"Okay, drive carefully."

"I can try," he said.

"See you soon," I said before hanging up and I let my phone drop in my lap before covering my face.

Ah what is wrong with me? He doesn't need to come here. I have class in the morning, and it isn't like we're at his frat house. We'd be alone here. If he wasn't so angry, I'd tell him to take us there, but I doubt he wants to see any of them right now.

"Maybe Carter was right. Maybe I shouldn't have called him."

I picked my phone up and navigated to the clock app before turning off my two-thirty alarm and put my feet down. I dropped my phone in my lap and decided to finish the last problem. After I did, I packed my bookbag for the classes I had on Fridays and picked out a simple outfit, laying everything out on my desk. I was gonna wear black jeans, a green polo, and a black denim jacket. I left my laptop out to charge on the plug and put my phone on the charger connected to an extension cord, tossing it on top of my bed. I grabbed a new pair of briefs, grey joggers, and a black t-shirt before grabbing my towel and shower caddy. I slipped on my shower shoes and opened my room door. I made sure it wasn't locked and was disappointed that it wasn't considering how late it was.

By the time I went to the communal bathroom on my dorm floor, took a shower, and came back into my room, Casimir had texted me, so I put on a pair of slip-on Vans and grabbed my keys to go get him. When I opened the side door he always uses, the first thing I noticed was how red his usually pale white skin was. For someone born and raised in California, the whiteness of his skin amazed me when I first saw him during UCLA's freshman orientation. His knuckles were bruised, and bleeding and his eyebrows were fixated in a tense position. The first thing I did when I saw him was smooth out his furrowed eyebrows with my left thumb and he visibly loosen up.

We got to my room, and he decided to use my stuff to take a shower and changed into his spare clothes that were mixed inside my drawers. It was almost four o'clock by then and I was tired, but I could tell by looking into his cornflower blue eyes that he wasn't.

"Do you remember the first time you drank?" He whispered as my eyes blinked slowly.

We were laying in my bed. I was laying on my right side with my back against the wall and Casimir was laying on his back, with his left arm behind his head and his left hand inside his joggers. My bed is lofted a couple inches off the floor because I like plopping down and not climbing up. I was lucky to maintain my single dorm room since sophomore year; being a scholarship student, it was better for me to stay on campus then off campus since I don't have money to waste on transportation. It's part of the reason I didn't join Greek.

"You know I don't," I whispered back.

"I remember."

"You said you didn't."

"I lied."

"I know," I said as I curled up slightly. "What happened today?"

"Demarcus from Sigma Alpha Epsilon is a dumb drunk and I know that, so I told Carter to make sure he didn't show up."

"And he still showed."

"I kept away from him because I knew that he would piss me off."

"What did he say?" I asked and he didn't say anything. "Tell me."

"Why should I?"

"Was it about me?"

"Why would it be about you?"

"Why would you let someone rile you up?" I asked and he looked down at me before sitting up.

"It's not that fucking simple," he said, and I touched his left arm causing him to look at me.

"Then tell me," I whispered, and he sighed.

He laid back down and faced me, putting his head on his left arm, "do you want to know why we were in the bathroom?" He asked.

"To pee?"

"Together?"

"It was my first time there and I was drunk."

"If it was Carter taking you, would you have went?" He asked and I stared at him before shaking my head softly.

"No."

"I–ah fuck," he said covering his face.

"What does that night have to do with this?"

"A lot," he said with a sad chuckle, and I pulled his wrist, dragging his hand away from his face. "That night, I beat his ass for the first time, and it was because he saw me on top of you, in that bathroom," he said and I let his wrist go, staring at him.

"What?" I asked. I suddenly didn't feel tired anymore, I was wide awake.

"You were on like your tenth drink, and you were sticking to me. I couldn't focus, so I took you upstairs and I wanted to leave you there, so I could focus but you wouldn't let me leave. You kept whining and then you had to go to the bathroom, so I took you. While you were drunkenly trying to go, I was trying not to lose my sensibility."

—

“H-hic, Cas, how do I take these off?”

“You unzip them.”

“It’s not working.”

“You’re not trying.”

“Can’t you just do it for me?! Why are you being so mean to me?”

“I’m not–fuck.”

—

“Was that before or after the pictures?”

“Before. I was trying to get you to leave the bathroom when you suggested we take them. I was already on edge, and I knew you wouldn’t remember anything, so I stayed behind you so it wouldn’t show in the picture.”

“What wouldn’t show?”

“You really don’t need me to say it, do you?” He asked and I bit my lip.

“Then what?”

“I told you to lay down in my room and I went back to the bathroom. I was in a rush, so I didn’t lock the door, and you came back. I think that was the first time I was actually angry with you.”

—

“Casimir? What are you doing?”

“Fuck. Fuck, why can’t you just stay still for ten minutes?!”

“Why are you being so mean–I can help you. Is that because of me?”

“Don’t–fuck Elias just go back to my room.”

“No. Let me help me you. Y-you just have to tell me how.”

—

“Did we have sex?” I asked slowly and he rolled his eyes.

“I’m not an idiot Elias,” he said as he ran his fingers through his hair.

“Then what?”

“Nothing eventful happened because you didn’t lock the door, and I was too fucked up to care at that point. I don’t know what I had planned to do to you but for some reason, that bitch came walking through. I don’t remember what he said but it was enough to piss me off. Since we were upstairs and you were fucked up, there was nobody to stop me, and I apparently gave him a concussion, but I was too busy trying to get you not to avoid me to care.”

“So, he was talking about that night?”

“No, he doesn’t remember that night. He didn’t even remember me, but he’s homophobic and you’re the only person I care about, and Carter says it’s obvious how I feel about you to everybody but you.”

“Well, that isn’t true,” I whispered, and he sighed. “I’m sorry for being a dumb drunk.”

“Yeah, that's why I don’t let you drink.”

“You can't prevent me from doing anything.”

“In a Greek house? Yeah I can and you’re too poor to go to a bar by yourself.”

“That is so mean to say to me and racist. A white man calling me poor?”

“You’re always bringing up race. If you hate me calling you poor, why do you keep me around you knowing what I want to do to you?”

"Because you're not poor, and as an orphan, I had nowhere to go during the summer," I said, and he smirked softly. "What about you? Do your parents know you're bisexual and like black men?"

"Well, I'm not bisexual, I'm pan and I don't really care what they think. If I cared about what they thought, I wouldn't have joined Greek either."

"I can't stay up talking to you. I have class."

"I know."

"Stop beating the same dude over and over," I said, and he licked his lips.

"I can't say that I won't do it again."

"Carter said you have a shitshow to clean up so you better not."

"I always have some shit to clean up."

"Are you telling me the truth about what happened?"

"Today?"

"No, two years ago."

"You don't believe me?"

"You lied once about it, why should I?" *I can't believe he lied to me. He told me nothing happened and now I was apparently slutting out in front of him. Me? A virgin? Is that really what happened—is that what I wanted.*

"Just go to sleep," he said as he rolled over on his back.

"Cassie."

"That's not going to work this time," he said as he closed his eyes, and I pushed my lips together.

"Did we really have sex?" *There's no way I would've forgotten that. Not my first time. Not my first time with him.*

"I already told you we didn't. Do you want me to keep you up or are you gonna go to bed?" He asked and I bit my lip.

"Fine, don't tell me," I said before turning around.

"Night."

"Good night," I mumbled as I stared at the white wall in front of me.

Fuck, how can I go to sleep now?! I hadn't seen the picture that way but now I can't stop imagining him. This is bad.

Dinner with Friends: Fiancé v. Friends

"Yuki!"

I looked in the direction from where I heard my name being called and smiled. I saw three of my New York friends that I've made since moving here from my hometown in Bristol, England, almost six years ago. Their names are Aaliyah, Lilianna, and Jermaine; they didn't know each other until three years ago but we all hang out whenever we can. I planned to meet them today over dinner at Boucherie, a French restaurant at their Union Square location along with my fiancé, Lucifer, since they don't know him that well.

"Hey Lili," I said once I was in ear-shot.

I consider Lilianna to be one of my closest friends. I met her a couple months after my move at an art gallery show opening by a Mexican-American artist. She's an art collector and a gallery owner, so she has expensive tastes. She's from New York, she's white, and speaks German, Greek, and Spanish in addition to English. She was wearing these white slip-on ballet flats, orange flare dress pants, a white button down t-shirt, and an orange cropped blazer; her straight brunette hair was in a high ponytail.

"Hey! You look pretty," she said as I approached the table, and I smiled.

"Thank you."

"How do you manage to not look like a girl?" Aaliyah asked with a slight eye roll that I chose to ignore. "You look more like a woman than I do," she said.

"I'm not sure. I don't have curves like you do."

"Your petiteness and babydoll face makes you look like one."

"Well, I do take advantage of that."

I was wearing white, closed-toe pump, high heeled sandals, fitted grey slacks, a white button down t-shirt tucked into the slacks, a grey sleeveless v-neck sweater, and a grey elasticated trim, soft bomber jacket. My hair was in two identically low messy buns, and I did a simple makeup look with a white graphic eyeliner and a lipstick that matched my natural lip color. I was carrying a white Panthère de Cartier tote bag and aside from my diamond stud earrings in my standard lobes, the only other jewelry I had on was my Cecily 14k white gold engagement ring (two carat lab-grown round centered diamond with four 3/4 round accented diamonds).

“But I’m not trying to be a woman. The clothes made for them just look better on me. They don’t make decent male clothing for someone as short and petite as me.”

“And that means you have to wear makeup?” Jermaine asked.

“If I didn’t have on lipstick and eyeliner, you wouldn’t even be able to tell so be quiet,” I said, rolling my eyes.

“Where’s your boy at?” Aaliyah asked as I pulled out a chair next to Lilianna, across from Jermaine.

I met Aaliyah at a bar almost four years ago and we've gone out together from time to time, but we weren't friends until two years ago. She’s from Iowa and moved here permanently with her now ex-boyfriend. She’s African-American and works in state’s treasury’s office. Her and Lilianna met two years ago at the same time they met Lucifer, at my thirtieth birthday party. She was wearing this black mock neck ruched, sleeveless jumpsuit, a navy blue cropped bomber jacket, and these black penny loafers; her hair was in medium knotless box braids styled in with the front half pulled back.

"You mean my man?" I asked as I sat down, putting my purse in my lap. "And he's a couple minutes away."

"You didn't come together?" Lilianna asked.

"No. I was at my place and took a taxi here. He's been working all day."

"Y'all living together yet?" Jermaine asked.

Jermaine is also African American, and I met him by chance through a person I no longer talk to because they tried to seduce Lucifer, almost a year ago. He works in construction and is from Arkansas. He moved to New York two years ago and I consider him fun to be around. He's met my fiancé once or twice, but they've never had a real conversation before. He was wearing a black wool jacket, green polo shirt, black leather belt, black slacks, and black sneakers.

"In a couple weeks. My lease is officially up in August and aside from my bedroom and the furniture in the living room, my apartment is basically empty."

"You're moving in with him right?" Aaliyah asked.

How many times have I talked about this in the past six months and you're still asking?!

"No, we got a new place. It's weird because we've been decorating it, but we haven't slept there yet. It's a little further away from LIE than where I am now, but it's comfortable and he likes it there."

I work for a consumer consulting firm that specializes in increasing consumer livelihood (or LIE Inc. for short). Our clients come to us with problems such as home renovations and repairs, interior design, construction, labor, loans, travel, etc., and we offer solutions by providing third party services.

"You need to be. I can't imagine paying rent for somewhere I ain't sleeping," Jermaine said, and I rubbed my lips before smiling softly.

"Is that a different ring? I feel like I've seen a different one when I came over a couple weeks ago," Lilianna said, and I looked down at my hands.

She actually noticed! This is why I love her. Nobody in my personal life has noticed aside from my brother but her. I knew she was the best person to ask to help with the floral arrangements.

"I have two, so maybe that's it?"

"You have two?!" Aaliyah asked.

"Well, the original ring he gave me was a natural diamond, but the metal was platinum which wears out faster and I'm always working with my hands so at first I wasn't wearing it to work. He noticed that and got me this one, it's a lab grown with white gold."

"How much was it?" Jermaine asked.

"I don't know! I didn't ask but the diamonds are smaller and lab-grown so it's less money. The diamond is what costs the most."

"Is the engraving the same?" Lilianna asked and I nodded, taking it off to show her.

"Amore Mio, Mio Per Sempre," I said.

"What does that mean again?" Aaliyah asked as I put the ring back on.

"Uh 'My Love, My Forever.' It can also mean 'Mine Forever.'"

"That's cute," she said.

"If I host a housewarming party, should it be before or after the ceremony?" I asked.

"After! Enjoy your time with him, you already have enough on your plate as it is," Lilianna said.

She's right. I've barely spent actual time with him this week. He's been so busy. Hopefully he gets here before we order drinks.

"The ceremony is in January though. I think it would be nice to have it in November maybe?"

"Well, there's nothing nice about winter in New York," Aaliyah said, humping her shoulder, and I hummed, nodding.

Am I imagining it or is her attitude worse than usual? Should I ask?

"That's true. Well in that case, maybe I'll host one in June," I said, looking down at my ring. "His birthday is in June and since he's turning thirty, I'll host a party for him since he did one for me."

"I can't believe he's only twenty-nine. I definitely thought he was older than you," Aaliyah said.

"Really? Does he look older?"

"No but how old was he when you met?"

"When we met? Well, I started in August at LIE so I guess twenty-four and we started dating when he was twenty-six and I was twenty-nine."

Lucifer and I both work at LIE Inc., and he is my current supervisor as the Chief Financial Officer. I have been the director of the sales department for five years—it was the position that made me move to New York— and the director of the marketing department for two years. My combined salaries ($850k) is the fifth highest in the company. Lucifer's current salary combined with his annual shares ($920k) makes him the third.

"Yeah, especially considering that he's a top executive. I mean wasn't he the COO or whatever he does when you started? He should be older than you," Aaliyah said.

“He inherited it almost and he has a good business sense,” I said. *Oh, could it be the money that’s making her annoyed? State employees will never make more than private firms, I can't help that. Does Jermaine also feel that way?*

“Why aren’t you just taking his position?” She asked.

“I declined it. I like where I am and the people I’m with,” I said, shrugging. “I worked hard for it and the people I work for. They don't deserve a new boss so sporadically again.”

“When is he quitting?” Lilianna asked. “I know you told me soon but when is that?”

“I don’t know. I stopped asking because he seemed annoyed with the executives, and I don’t want him to accidentally take it out on me.”

“He wouldn’t do that,” she said.

“I know, but I still don’t want to ask or make it feel like I’m rushing him. We're both doing so much moving around that I don't want to catch his misdirected anger.”

“See, I would've left that job already,” Aaliyah said.

“You work for the state. Politicians are just as bad,” Jermaine said.

“That’s definitely true,” she said. "But it must be nice to have someone willing to leave their job just so you can keep yours."

“I make too much money to quit. I’m too comfortable with my combined salaries. Finding another position that would pay me the same amount would be hard Aaliyah,” I said.

"How much is it?"

"I don't want to say but he'll make more money than me again in the long run because he's good at business. Besides, being married to my supervisor is weird so I can respect LIE policy in that way.

“I would hate to do your taxes,” Lilianna said, and I laughed. “Oh, by the way, you speak French right?” She asked and I nodded.

Much like Lilianna, I am a polylingual person. The majority of the reason is because I have Chinese, Thai, Japanese, and Nigerien ancestry; my grandparents were travel driven and progressives. I’m fluent in ten languages including Hausa, the native language of Niger, Cantonese, and French. Language is important to me, it helps me communicate with the things I love, whether that be people or historical documents.

“Great because I have no idea what half this shit says,” she said, and I looked down at the table before picking up the menu in front of me.

“Oh, who picked this restaurant?”

“You did,” Jermaine said.

“No? I would—oh my fiancé must’ve picked it. I didn’t think much about it at the time, sorry! We could’ve gone somewhere else.”

“Well, you offered to pay so you should choose," he said.

“It’s expensive though, especially for six people,” Lilianna said.

“It’ll be fine! I can explain the menu if you need me too,” I said as I looked for the wines on the menu. “You should order drinks and appetizers if you want. I can order for Cuddy,” I said absentmindedly as I looked over the white wines.

“You sure?” Lilianna asked.

“Yes, he’ll be here soon. He said he was a couple minutes away when I was getting out the taxi.”

“Okay,” she said, and I pushed my lips together, subconsciously, as I looked.

I zoned out completely as I looked at the wines, then the liquor, and then the food portion of the menu. The three of them didn't ask me any questions that required a vocal response as I looked. It wasn't until I heard my name called that I looked up and I saw a waiter standing at the edge of the table, on the other side of Jermaine and Lilianna.

"Sorry," I said, noticing he was looking directly at me. "I will get the twelve-year-old Pappy Van Winkle Bourbon for my fiancé and the '73 Domaine des Baumard with the salmon caviar for me."

"For the dessert wine, did you want the bottle or a glass?" He asked as he wrote against a black notepad.

"The bottle is fine," I said, putting the menu down and he nodded.

"I'll go put that in for you," he said before walking away from the table.

I crossed my legs, turning to look behind me, squinting slightly before letting my eyes sit naturally as I saw a familiar face and body. I watched them until we made eye contact and without saying anything, I turned my head and rubbed my lips.

"Are you going out tomorrow?" I asked, looking at Aaliyah.

"Oh, I was. Do you want to come?"

"No."

"Then why'd you ask?!" She asked, laughing.

"I can't ask?"

"You can, why don't you go with your boy more often?"

"He touches me too much and doesn't let me dance by myself."

"I thought you liked that?" I heard a familiar low and hoarse voice say from behind me.

“You know you chose an expensive restaurant. I feel bad eating here,” Lilianna said, and I saw my fiancé walk up to me out of the corner of my left eye.

“I don’t consider this expensive,” he said, and he leaned over my body, tilting my neck back before pecking my lips. “I’m sorry for being late,” he whispered as we stared at each other.

He had on a pair of black Armani Exchange ‘Action’ leather sneakers, a pair of black calf socks, black slim fit slacks also from Armani Exchange, a white tank top, and a white Luca Faloni silk cotton short sleeve polo shirt. He had on a pair of black Armani Exchange sunglasses and his hair was neatly slicked back into his tapered undercut.

“Mhm,” I whispered, and he let my face go before sitting on my right, putting his left hand on my lower back.

He smells so good. He must've put on his Dior cologne.

“I feel like he just called us poor,” Lilianna said, and I rubbed my lips.

“He doesn’t mean it that way,” I said softly. “He was born with money so, it’s arrogantly normal for him.”

“Like your parents weren’t well off,” he said.

“Not as much as yours,” I said and he rubbed my back, putting his hand underneath my jacket and I looked at him. “Hmm?” I asked quietly.

“You’re just beautiful,” he whispered, and I smiled shyly.

“I ordered you a bourbon,” I said, grabbing his menu before finding the liquor section. “Um, this one,” I said, pointing to it and his eyes that had been on my face, slowly left them to look at the menu.

“Mhm,” he said, nodding. “Thank you Sugar.”

“You’re welcome, I’m glad I chose correctly,” I said.

"How's your business going?" Aaliyah asked and Lucifer ran his fingers through his hair.

"It's stabilizing."

"That's good," Lilianna said.

"I was thinking of getting another tattoo so remind me later which ones are yours," Jermaine said.

"Is that why you haven't quit?" Aaliyah said and I bit the inside of my lip.

I hate when she does that. I already told them why and that he doesn't like to be asked about, why does she need to piss him off like this?

"I haven't quit because I haven't found a replacement that has been accepted. My baby doesn't want it and if I quit in a disrespectful fashion, I won't be able to keep the business partners I have," he explained.

"Wouldn't it just be easier if you did take it?" She asked, looking at me.

"I—," I started to say but Lucifer cut me off.

"Yuki only needs to say no once," he said, and his tone was borderline disrespectful. *He seems like he's in a bad mood, but I appreciate him saying that. I don't know why she doesn't get that I don't want the job.*

"Cuddy," I whispered and his left eye twitched.

"What?" He asked and the change to softness in his voice was evident.

"Don't be mean," I said.

"You know as well as I do that this isn't me being mean," he said, and I stared at him with a small frown. "Alright, alright," he said before rubbing the skin under my chin.

"He gets prickly at night. Once he starts drinking he'll be more fun to be around," I said, looking around at them.

“Yuichi said something completely different the one time I went out with you guys,” Lilianna said.

“You go out with them?” Aaliyah asked and I bit my lip. “Why do I feel like I’ve never been out with you and your other friends?” She asked me.

Yuichi is my younger brother of four years who came to New York after finishing medical school six years ago. He had moved here from England three months before I did, and we shared an apartment until I moved out in August of that year. He’s painfully straight and just recently became a licensed neurosurgeon. He looks identical to me except he has black hair and deep brown eyes; I have white skin and blue eyes.

“Yui is my brother, not my friend, so you don’t really need to go out with us. But what did he say?” I asked, looking at Lilianna.

“He said that your fiancé doesn’t get drunk, but he becomes more aware of how much he doesn’t like people and becomes more closed up than usual," Lilianna said and Lucifer's eyes were looking down at the menu, having flipped it over to the food section.

“He doesn’t get drunk?” Jermaine asked.

“He has a high tolerance. He definitely has a shortened lifespan because he pushes his limits a lot,” I said. “But I don’t think he is more closed off than normal.”

“Well, it’s probably not a coincidence that he keeps you near him in the club,” Lilianna said. “And at least you know he’s closed off normally.”

“Yuki’s a lightweight and likes to roam around,” Lucifer said.

“You call everybody a lightweight,” I said, rolling my eyes.

“Yeah but you especially,” he said as his hand traveled up my back further and I unintentionally arched my back, sitting up straighter, letting him touch me more.

“Since you like throwing money around, you should be going somewhere expensive for the honeymoon. Where are you taking Yuki?” Aaliyah asked and I looked at Lucifer who was blinking rapidly.

I know that he really doesn’t like Aaliyah but hopefully he isn’t too rude to her today. I don’t why she thought she’d be in the wedding when she can’t even pretend to like him. I think it's about the money and if she has a problem with it, why be friends with me?

“Hey,” I said softly, and Lucifer looked at me before sighing.

“They haven’t chosen yet. I wanted to take them to Phuket but—.”

“I’ve been there too many times, and my grandmother died there so I don’t want to go again until I’m like fifty," I said.

“I know that Sugar, I’m explaining my reasoning.”

“I can explain it better than you can," I responded.

“Then do you want to talk?”

“She asked you.”

“Then let me talk, Sugar,” he said, chuckling, and I smiled at him. “Then there was the original plan on my private island but that’s too cliche apparently.”

“That’s not what I said,” I said laughing, and he scoffed. “When we were talking about it, there was nothing in your name,” I said.

“If I remember correctly, I hadn’t even proposed to you then, so the offer was invalid anyway,” he explained, and I rolled my eyes. “Fuck Sugar, keep your mouth shut for a minute,” he said as rubbed my lower back, and I bit my lip so I wouldn’t smile too obviously.

His mood seems to be getting better. How can he still be so attractive when he curses though? Is it because he's so sweet to me?

"Are you serious?" Aaliyah asked, a little annoyed, which made me annoyed.

He didn't even say it aggressively, why is she doing this today?! She's worse than normal and it has to be because he's actually talking to her. The last time we went out she got mad that he wasn't. What is her problem?!

"Where's the island?" Lilianna asked, changing the tone of the conversation.

My god, I'm so glad she's here. How come our drinks still aren't here yet? This conversation would be forced to stop when the waiter comes back and hopefully it gets lighter. I should ask Aaliyah what's wrong before she makes this even more awkward.

"It's in the Atlantic Ocean and my family has owned it for around seventy years," Lucifer explained. "I haven't been in a while though."

"They just give it up?" Jermaine asked.

"It usually goes to the son that has the best business brain essentially. I'm the fourth out of I want to say twelve Morelli's," Lucifer explained.

"Is that why your name isn't really Lucifer?" Lilianna asked.

"I'm surprised you remembered that," I said.

"If I don't remember what happens when we get drunk, nobody will," she said laughing and I laughed with her.

"That's true," I said as I laughed.

"Originally it wasn't, no but now it is," Lucifer said as we stopped laughing.

"Your family must be really conservative to keep that tradition," she said.

"I get benefits from it, so it never really mattered to me."

"What's your real name then?" Aaliyah asked.

"My name is Lucifer, legally and all."

"What is it?" She asked, looking at me, and I smiled.

"It's not my business to tell and I met him as Lucifer so that's his name," I said.

"Is that not weird to suddenly go by a different name?" Jermaine asked.

"No. I'm not inherently good at keeping interested in things if it isn't business related, so my attachment levels to things are lower than others."

"Is that something you should say in front of Yuki?" Aaliyah asked.

"I like his honesty," I responded. "He's my man for a reason," I said as I uncrossed my legs, moving to sit further back into the chair. Lucifer's hand moved up my back before putting it on my left shoulder, the weight of his arm on the back of the chair.

"Yuki's real personality is worse than mine," Lucifer said as he rubbed my shoulder.

"What's that supposed to mean? You talk as if I'm bipolar," I said as I moved my left hand towards his and he laced them together.

"More like DID," he said as our hands rested on my shoulder.

"You think I'm crazy?!" I asked as he rubbed my hand with his thumb.

"You aren't? You flip switches like a broken lightbulb."

"Did you get that from Yui?"

"I did actually," he said as he chuckled.

"Pensi che io sia pazzo?" I asked with a frown, and he licked his top lip.

"Non farlo," he said, shaking his head as he looked away from me.

"Allora non baciarmi o toccarmi," I said as I unlaced our hands.

"È una minaccia vuota," he said as he ran his hand against the side of my neck.

"È così?" I asked, pushing his hand away.

"For fuck's sake," he whispered as he moved his arm to rest on the back of my chair. "Why do you know Italian so well?"

"So, I can understand you when you talk shit about me."

"I don't need to do that in another language."

"You shouldn't do it in any language," Aaliyah said. "If you think he's crazy, you shouldn't be with him," she said, and I stared at her.

She can't be—

"Aaliyah what is your–," I started to say but I was cut off.

"Alright, I'm sorry about that wait," the waiter said as he stopped in front of our table, and I sighed mentally.

"Thank you. You have such good timing," I said smiling as I leaned towards the table as I looked at him. *I'm definitely going to need to drink the entire bottle to deal with this.*

"I usually never hear that," he said with a small laugh as he placed a saucer in front of me. "Here's that caviar for you."

"Thank you," I said, and I put the plate in the center of me.

As he passed out the drinks to Lilianna, Aaliyah, and Jermaine, I looked at my fiancé. At first glance, he didn't seem annoyed, but I knew that it was because his face is naturally stoic and hard to read. I ran my right hand against his left thigh and his eyes twitched.

"Here's that bourbon, I'm guessing for you," he said towards Lucifer and Lucifer nodded, moving his eyes from my hand to the waiter. "And lastly," he said as he put an empty wine glass in front of me before grabbing the corkscrew that had been laying on his tray.

He opened the bottle of red in front of us and poured me a glass before setting the bottle down in front of me, more to my left near Lucifer. After that, he pulled out his notepad and pen from his black pocketed waist apron. “What can I get for you?” He asked.

“Yuki,” Lucifer said, and I looked at him before rubbing my lips.

His tone told me he wasn’t feeling cordial anymore and to me, that meant that I wouldn’t be able to see him enjoying himself like I wanted. If I had known that Aaliyah was going to talk like she was, I wouldn’t have invited her; she’s never given me any signs that she disliked him, so I had no idea where this was coming from.

“Okay um can we have the Chateaubriand Pour Deux from the Les Grands Format section; can the beef be well done? I want the Caesar salad on the side, but can we also get béarnaise,” I said as I reached for the saucer and one of the utensil wrap packets.

“Do you have a preference for how the seasonal vegetables are cooked?” He asked as I unraveled the cloth napkin around the utensils.

“Um with as little butter as possible but sauteed is fine.”

“Tell DuPont that it’s Morelli’s asking,” Lucifer said as he swirled the glass in his right hand, resting his left hand on top of my ass.

“Oh, is that the French guy who’s catering your engagement party?” Lilianna asked.

“You told her that?” I asked, looking at Lucifer and he nodded subtly as he stared at the brown liquor.

“I’ll make sure to tell him, is there anything else?”

“No, that's it for us,” I said as I grabbed the spoon, inspecting it.

"I'll take the Poulet Chasseur," Lilianna said as I scooped up some of the caviar from on top of the salmon. "Did I pronounce that right?" She asked and I could see her looking at me through my peripheral.

"It was close," I said before putting the caviar in my mouth.

"Ugh, should I learn French too?" She asked as Jermaine started to order and I swallowed the caviar whole.

"I'll just get the Filet Mignon," Jermaine said while pointing to the menu.

"The grammar is mostly the same as Spanish," I said as the waiter glanced down at Jermaine's menu in between writing.

"How did you want your steak?" He asked.

"I know it is, but I can barely speak German, and I only remember Greek because I read passages of it often unlike someone who speaks a dead language."

"Medium well," Jermaine responded, placing his menu down.

"You can't speak Latin because it is a dead language. I'm fluent in literacy but if I start uttering words in Latin, they'd think I was a modern witch."

"Okay and for you Miss?" The waiter asked.

"You already look like one."

She was referring to the fact that despite not having albinism, I was born with white hair; my skin color fluctuates because of my mixed genetics but right now I'm a warm chocolate brown. I was also cursely blessed with heterochromia making my left eye a cornflower blue while my right eye is a dark brown/black color.

"Thanks," I said as I rolled my eyes.

"I'll just take the steak frites," Aaliyah said as Lilianna quietly laughed. "I want it well done," Aaliyah continued.

"Alright," the waiter said as he wrote. "I'll go put that in and take these," he said after he stopped writing and put his pen and pad in his apron.

Lucifer slid his menu towards me, and I grabbed his with mine before handing it to Lilianna who handed them to the waiter along with hers. After grabbing the menus from Lilianna, Jermaine, and Aaliyah, he folded up the tray holder he had placed down, sliding the tray and the menus under his left arm. As he walked away, I scooped up more caviar.

"Aaliyah, I don't know you that well, but I think you should try playing the silent game," Jermaine said as soon as the waiter was out of earshot.

"Excuse me?!" Aaliyah said as I put the caviar in my mouth.

"Everything that comes out of your mouth is pissing somebody off. If you're pissed, keep that shit to yourself but don't bring the mood down with your bullshit."

"I wouldn't put it like that but he's right. You're being hypercritical for no reason. Lucifer just talks like that and he's not being disrespectful to Yuki," Lilianna said.

"The fact that he hasn't cursed you out of respect for Yuki is proof enough," Jermaine said.

"Stop acting like that's shit normal, I don't care if he's not being disrespectful–."

"Aaliyah!" I said as my nostrils flared. "Lucifer is my man and if you don't like it, don't consider us friends anymore," I said as I stared at her.

"Are you serious?" She asked as her eyes narrowed.

"Yes! I don't know who you're comparing him to and I'm sorry that he's making you uncomfortable or whatever this is but if you wanted to talk about it, you shouldn't have resorted

to criticizing him for every little thing he says. At least not now and not in front of him. He has a lot on his plate and doesn't need you trying to tell him how to love me. He loves me and is not abusive, and that should be enough for you as my friend. Lilianna understands so why can't you?!" I ranted angrily but slowly so I wouldn't raise my voice and Lucifer rubbed my back.

"Take a drink," he said as he rubbed my nape, and I looked at him.

As we made eye contact, he nodded towards the table and I sighed, closing my eyes. I put the spoon down against the side of the salmon and picked up the wine glass. I took two small sips before swallowing the wine and I placed the glass down before rubbing my lips.

"You like it?" I asked as he moved his hand to the middle of my back.

"Yes," I whispered, and he kissed the side of my temple.

"I'm gonna go make a call," he said, and I nodded softly as he got up.

His glass was empty, and I didn't even realize he had drank it. He kissed the top of my head before walking away from the table and I rubbed my hands against my thighs.

"Let's just talk about work and other things besides relationships before I really blow my shit," I said, not making eye contact with anyone.

"That'd be the first time," Jermaine said.

"You're almost the same person," Lilianna said, and I looked at her before smiling.

"That's what Yui told me after they first met."

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