



ZUXORI

THE REINCARNATION SEQUEL
TO ROMEO + JULIET

ZU X ORI

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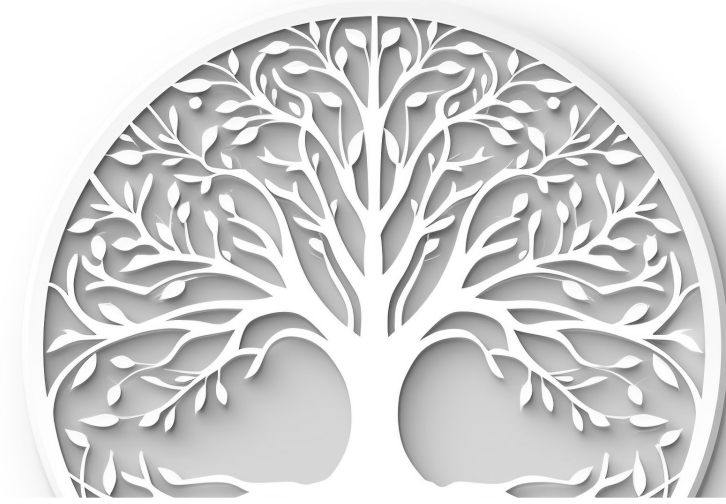
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ZU X ORI

THE REINCARNATION SEQUEL
TO ROMEO + JULIET

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Prologue

A Note on Public Domain

What's past is prologue.

— William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

Shakespeare never said much about the families.

-- Hermes, *Two Houses Alike*



EPISODE 1 **ZU**

My name is Zu.

And I have a story to tell. The weird thing is, I'm not sure what it is.

But what I know—is it's an amazing story. Maybe that's how all storytellers feel. But this feels like *my* story, which is strange because I'm only 16, and I haven't done anything too impressive. But in this story inside me, I can feel all the passion, the people, the drama and the tragedy, the heartache.

The love.

ZU

Sometimes I wonder, where did this story come from? Did all this come from my imagination—or somewhere else? It doesn't matter.

I'm the one who has to tell it.

I'm sitting at Jack's Coffee in New York City, drawing by the dawn windows. That's how I tell stories. I let the pencil guide my hand, until the pictures take shape. The people, the places unfold on my tablet—and slowly, bit by bit, a story begins to emerge.

Like broken pieces of a puzzle.

Right now, I'm drawing a grasshopper with the charcoal brush. I love the feel of the charcoal. There's something about the black and white—it's stark and to the point. Usually, I draw faces I see in my imagination. And of course, grasshoppers. They are the coolest insects.

Together these drawings tell my story.

But like I said, I'm not sure how.

So I keep drawing.

My teacher, Professor Lauren, likes to tell me: "Zu, your story will find you."

Zu's actually my nickname. It's short for Zhu, my last name, which non-Chinese speakers can never pronounce.

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In junior high, my friends began calling me Zu—because I hated my real first name.

What is it?

Oh God—I'll only tell if you promise never to tell anyone.

Did you promise?

Okay.

It's Agnes.

Can you believe it? My parents named me Agnes!

Agnes Zhu.

No offense to anyone named Agnes. But I felt I'd been handed a one-way bus ticket to the past. And I wasn't getting on board.

Actually, in Hong Kong where I grew up, lots of people have quirky names—like Cricket, Money, or Cola. So, Agnes isn't even that strange. But I still hated it. My mom, who chose the name, likes to remind me that Agnes means "beautiful and pure."

I don't care.

Anyway, Zu fits me better. There's just something about it that feels like me.

Something about the sound.

ZU

Until two weeks ago, I lived my whole life in Hong Kong. If you've never been there—Hong Kong is amazing. We have more skyscrapers than any city in the world and so many beautiful beaches and hills. I went to an International School there, and I had friends from everywhere.

It was super hard to leave them when, this summer, my dad took a job in New York City. I wasn't sure I'd have the courage to move so far away.

But I knew I had to go.

More than anything in my life.

Why?

Well, to understand this—I need to tell you something. Something I've never told anyone. Because it doesn't make any sense. Not even to me.

And that's okay.

You don't have to believe me.

But around this time last year, I made a drawing. A special one. It was my first time really drawing *from my imagination*. The picture in my mind, not some object or something I'd seen.

I remember it vividly: I was on the ferry coming over from Tsim Sha Tsui, when I had a sudden urge to draw.

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Which is odd, because I don't draw on the ferry. But that day I did.

And I remember every line.

That day, my imagination had no doubt. Every line, every curve, came from deep inside me.

It was a drawing of a young person—a boy.

It was just a sketch. But there was something in the texture of his hair, the tone of his chin, and mostly—in his eyes, that captured me. There was a quiet power that seemed to see right into me. As if this was someone I knew. Or rather—someone who knew me.

Or both.

After I finished, I looked up across Victoria Harbour, up at the silver rising skyline. And that's when I knew: I was going to leave Hong Kong.

When?

To where? I had no idea.

But in that instant, I knew—my life was leading me elsewhere.

The drawing kept bringing me back. Between classes, or on the bus, or before I went to sleep. I'd sneak glances at

ZU

this face—this boy I had drawn. In my free moments, I'd take out my tablet and look in his eyes.

It was the strangest feeling: that I knew him, better than anyone, my parents, my friends.

Anyone.

And I felt this sadness I'd never felt before.

It held a power over me, like an unstoppable force. Sometimes I feared it would sweep me under, into its bottomless depth of feeling.

Like a tsunami wave.

I started to look for this person. This is what I don't tell anyone—it made no sense. But I wondered if somehow this person was out there, somewhere.

So I looked.

In people's eyes.

Whenever I met someone—or even strangers in the street—I would look them directly in the eye. That's how I'll know, I told myself.

By the look in their eye.

So now, everyone thinks I have very good manners, because whenever I meet them, I look them straight in the eye.

ZU X ORI

But they don't know why.

It wasn't long afterward my dad was offered a job in New York City. We had to wait a whole year, though—because of the virus.

But now I'm here.

So I'm at Trinity Rose—it's my second week as a sophomore. Trinity is like an art school, but they're big into science and technology too. Mostly it's about being creative—expressing who you really are, as they like to say. Whether that's playing the cello, building a robot army, or in my case, drawing stories.

I've made a few friends.

But I still feel pretty new. The other kids already know each other. Luckily I got assigned Professor Lauren (that's her first name, not her last) as my advisor. She teaches theater history, and for whatever reason—we just connect. In some weird way, she's almost like family. She's been helping me adjust to New York and has taken an interest in my drawings.

My grasshopper is finished.

I flip through my sketches. It's a collection of the strangest scenes—places I've never been and faces I've never seen. There are flower gardens and old city squares,

ZU

roses and stone fountains, dry rolling hills—and of course, the funny grasshoppers.

The faces are the most striking.

It's like they have a life of their own, beyond my pencil and tablet. As if by drawing them, I am actually coming closer to them.

One of them has fierce, narrow eyes. It's like he only sees what he wants. He has sharp features and a hard mouth. I keep drawing him differently—as if I'm trying to understand him. He doesn't seem very nice, but I've developed a soft spot for him.

Another one wears a robe. He feels kindly and holds his hands outstretched on both sides. Like an act of penance or forgiveness. For some reason, I always draw him surrounded by nature and animals.

The last one is a young girl, gazing into a mirror. I can't make out much about her, and whenever I draw her, it ends up being the same.

But above all, one stands out.

The face of the boy.

I only drew him once. It was like my imagination captured him completely.

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In this one drawing from the ferry.

I'm looking at him now.

His features are still so vivid. In his face is a warmth and openness that touches me. It's only a sketch, but in this face, there is so much life.

The alarm on my phone sounds off.

I'm abruptly jarred from my stupor.

I quickly collect my tablet, pencil and things, packing them into my backpack.

I head toward the counter, to the barista.

"Matcha latte?" he says.

I look the barista directly in the eyes. I let myself be completely open, waiting to see how he will respond. To see what kind of connection we'll make. He gives me a friendly look. But it's nothing special.

I collect my drink, say thanks.

It's time for school.



I ride the MTA bus to Trinity Rose, looking out the windows. The brownstone buildings and busy New York streets still fascinate me. It's less crowded than Hong Kong,

ZU

actually—but it’s busy in its own way. Between my earbuds, I watch people exiting and boarding the bus.

What else can I tell you?

I’m a pretty casual dresser—a large sweatshirt and white sneakers will do—and I have curious, brown eyes. The boldest thing I’ve ever done is dye my hair a silver purple. That was this summer. My mom nearly had a heart attack. But it’s my hair—so I’ll do what I want.

I walk the last block to Trinity.

Through the treetops, I feel the warm morning sun kissing my face and arms. I approach the other kids, funneling toward the entrance.

Trinity Rose is a gothic, ivy-bound building nestled among houses in the neighborhood. On banners outside the building is the name Trinity Rose, below a three-rose emblem. It used to be a Catholic school, but the new owners who bought it kept the name.

Near the entrance, I’m jostled from behind. I spin around, seeing a bubbly, dark-haired girl.

“Kimmo,” I catch my breath.

“What did you draw?” she eyes me. She peeks into my backpack, playfully. “Crickets again?”

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"They're grasshoppers," I reply.

I give her a friendly look.

"Lemme see," she grabs for my tablet, pretending to examine it.

I met Kimmo my first day, and we bonded from the start. She's kind of quirky and smells faintly like jasmine. And she knows *everyone* at the school.

We reach the double-doored entrance, mingling among the other kids. In the clean morning air, I can smell the ivy on the stone building, the warm aroma of granite, the dusty musk of the autumn trees, and clothing—the scent of denim and detergents, shampoos, leather bracelets and dirty shoes, even a whiff of day-old gum stuck on the back of a wooden bench.

Oh! I guess I forgot to mention.

I have a great sense of smell. It might be the most special thing about me.

I can smell *anything* from fifty feet away. For me, smell is like sight. As much as you can see, I can smell. Sometimes it's overwhelming—being flooded by fragrances, both amazing and awful. But mostly, it's pretty cool. This summer my friend was making lychee bubble tea inside her apartment. I could smell it a block away.

ZU

Most people underestimate the power of smell. Think of it this way. If you're in a room with me, I can smell you. I don't mean in a bad way, but just—the way you smell.

Everyone has their own unique scent, and it actually says a lot about you. I mean, we all know animals can smell fear. Well, it's like that. Emotions, and other parts of our personality, have a smell.

It's *our* smell.

Who knows? Maybe that's why I bonded with Kimmo. Her happy jasmine scent makes me smile.

All of you with a great sense of smell, you know what I mean. It's actually called hyperosmia.

My mom even got me diagnosed.

Hyperosmia has its ups and downs. On the plus side, the most incredible fragrances of plants, flowers and foods are super alive for me. On the downside, rotting, moldy things, sweaty socks and mouse poop are *everywhere*.

Kimmo and I advance down the lightly-crowded hallways. I'm drafting on her jasmine scent, which wards off the odor of bad perfume and floor cleaner. Students pass us, heading into classrooms or gathering in groups.

It's a sea of kids I don't know.

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I scan their faces, almost automatically. It's become my habit. My eyes move from face to face. I ask myself: Are you the person that I drew?

The one I once knew.

The other kids pass by, oblivious to me. I watch their eyes moving, as they gaze past me. But a few meet mine, if only for a moment.

And we touch eyes.

A curly-haired boy, with an innocent face, is one of them. He closes his locker as our eyes connect. I can see right into him. There's a certain sweetness and kindness behind his eyes, and a shy curiosity.

But he's not who I'm looking for.

How do I know?

I've looked in so many eyes. Now I just know. Because this person—if they even exist—will know me. In their eyes, I will know they know me.

It will only take two seconds.

That's all I need to know.

A girl with straight, blond hair—a freshman, I think—approaches up the hallway. Our eyes also meet. I see an

ZU

exciting spark, a fire behind her gaze that surprises me. I find her interesting.

But she's not the one I've drawn.

Her eyes only see so far.

Inside of me.

I let her go.

With Kimmo, I cross the main concourse, a light-filled space with slanted skylights. Hanging from the ceiling are long banners, with the words draped across in capital letters: Trinity Lights.

The Lights.

That's what everyone calls it.

It's Trinity's big event (our Time to Shine, as the teachers say) at the beginning of the school year. It's a performance night and fundraiser, and anyone can enter. Basically you get five minutes for whatever you want. As long as it's an expression of yourself.

Last year, one girl hacked a satellite to track her cat around. That sounds pretty impressive. Another kid made their sister disappear in a hat. But you can also just sing or dance, or do a science experiment.

ZU X ORI

Anyway, The Lights is kind of a thing. They rent out a theater, sell out tickets and people from all over New York show up for it. I heard someone got into Juilliard because of it.

The main idea is spontaneity. You're not supposed to prepare too much. That's why it's at the beginning of the year, not the end.

It's actually pretty cool.

So I hear.

Today is the last day of signups. The event will be held five days from now.

"Are you gonna do it?" I ask Kimmo.

"Nah, no talent," she scoffs.

In my mind, Kimmo is one of the most creative kids I know. I'm genuinely perplexed.

I don't know why she would say that.

I make a right turn into geometry class. I hear our teacher, Ms. Mehta, announce: "I hope everyone is ready for polyhedrons."



ZU

I sit toward the side of the class, my tablet tilted, sketching silently. On one half of the screen are my polyhedra.

My own drawings on the other.

I am listening to Ms. Mehta, but in my imagination I see roses on a vine, twisting in the cracks of a house. I trace the image onto the screen.



Second period is theater history, with Professor Lauren. It's my favorite class, mostly because of Lauren. She's young for a teacher, and I love hearing her talk about the craft of theater and storytelling.

I relax and lose myself in her words. There's something calming about her presence.

To me, at least.

Lauren strolls among our tables. "The original idea for theater," she tells us, "was to give audiences an experience of something beyond everyday life. So they told stories of the gods, or myths—or a tragedy that connected people to their feelings."

"Or by using laughter," she adds, "in the comedies."

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Lauren holds two white, plaster masks—an anguished face for tragedy, a laughing face for comedy—one in each outstretched hand.

“The goal of theater,” says Lauren, “was to heal or purify through an experience of the soul. They wanted to guide the audience toward a grand vision of life, in their own imaginations. The Greeks called this *theama*. That’s why we call it *theater*.”

I look down at the table, thinking about this, while another student asks a question.

The second half of class is spent writing our own dramas. We practice short comedies or tragedies, taken from our own lives.

I have nothing to write about.

At least not in words.

Lauren approaches my table, leaning over me gently. She smells like warm, earthy rose, if that makes any sense. I let the fragrance envelop me.

I am the only one not writing. I lean over my tablet, outlining a bare-branched tree.

“How’s it going, Zu?” Lauren asks me.

“Fine.”

ZU

"Can I see your drawing?"

I pause my unfinished sketch. Aside from Kimmo, Lauren is the only one I trust with my drawings. She's been helping me explore the people I'm drawing, and what they mean to me.

I flip to a sketch of the hard-eyed person. Lauren taps her finger on the table. "What is *his* story?" she asks with interest.

"I don't know," I say.

"He doesn't look happy."

"No, he's angry."

I hadn't realized that before.

"What's he angry about?" Lauren asks the question, letting me ponder the answer.

"I have no clue," I raise my eyebrows. I take a moment, looking deeper into the dark, charcoal drawing. "He's holding a grudge," I say, surprising myself. "He wants some kind of revenge."

"Can I see another?"

I swipe sideways, slowly. There are two more sketches of the angry person, then a page of roses and fountains.

"Wow," says Lauren. "I haven't seen these."

ZU X ORI

I stop at my drawing of the robed figure. Lauren reaches down, swiping past it.

"Who's this?" she asks me.

I hesitate.

It's my drawing of the boy, which I've never shown to anyone. Not even Lauren.

"I'm not sure—" I say.

I'm not ready for this.

Lauren peers into the drawing. She seems as absorbed by the person as I am.

I gaze up into her face.

"Is he part of the story?" she asks.

I tighten my lips. Behind my stoic demeanor, I feel vulnerable and exposed. Somewhere in my chest is a pain I'd rather not feel. Lauren's question is taking me beneath the surface of my feelings.

"I think he's the main character," I allow myself to say, relieving the pressure in my chest, a little.

"Tell me about him."

My lips purse tighter.

ZU

“He’s—independent,” I say, cautiously. “He doesn’t like being told what to do. Or how to be.” I feel I’m learning about him, as I speak.

“And he’s in pain,” I say instinctively.

Again I feel the sadness washing over me. The tsunami wave again. I feel like I’m no longer in the classroom, but underwater, falling. “He lost something,” I say, editing the words inside my head.

I tense up, expecting Lauren to ask more questions I don’t want to answer.

Lauren withdraws, as if about to leave.

“Does he have a name?”

I feel a wall go up.

My imagination won’t go there anymore. At the same time, I can feel a sound, on the tip of my tongue, almost ready to roll off.

There’s a power in the name.

But I’m not ready for it.

“No name,” I turn off my tablet.

Lauren steps back from the table. “Well, I like what you’re drawing,” she says gently. “Have you considered doing The Lights?”

ZU X ORI

"The Lights?" I say.

Is Lauren crazy? All I have is a bunch of drawings.

"Just think it over," Lauren says, easily. "It might help you flesh out your story."

Or give me a panic attack.

No thanks.



I have a free period before lunch.

Kimmo corrals me at a hallway crossing. It's a relief to breathe-in her jasmine again. She's with Aisha, another girl that I know. "Come on," Kimmo pulls me along. "We're heading to open stage."

Together we go up the hall.

In the auditorium, students are sitting by the stage, taking turns practicing for The Lights. I follow Kimmo and Aisha toward the stage.

We take seats near the aisle.

On the stage is a ninth grader, with a homemade robot she has made. Guided by a controller, the robot retrieves an orange, and then a grape from a plate, before blowing a fuse and smoking up the stage.

ZU

A few more kids come on. There's an a cappella singer, followed by a juggler.

"You could do that," I tell Kimmo.

"I *don't* juggle."

"No—but something else."

"Such as?"

"I don't know, just talk?" I shrug. I feel like Kimmo is naturally good at everything, although nothing jumps to mind.

Kimmo turns to Aisha. Together they're exchanging the latest Trinity Rose gossip.

But I've stopped listening.

Something else has caught my ear.

At first, I hear it only as a sound, a beautiful melody of sorts. It's barely even words.

And I can't tell who's speaking.

"..my lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand

To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.."

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The words arrive like a song, a summer wind from across a field, wandering, running, leaping to my ear. I have long forgotten Kimmo beside me. I turn my head to the sound of the voice.

On the stage is an older boy, standing apart from the others. He is tall and strongly built, with a commanding kind of presence.

"That's Landon," Kimmo looks at me. "He's a senior."

The eyes of the assembly are on him, listening in a way they weren't before.

Opposite him, another girl speaks:

*"Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much,
Which mannerly devotion shows in this;
For saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch,
And palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss."*

I blink, watching the two of them. I don't know why, but I feel confused. Landon, the older boy, replies:

"Have not saints lips, and holy palmers too?"

ZU

But something's wrong.

The warmth in my heart has turned to ice. Something is wrong with the words I'm hearing. The way Landon is saying them—it's too cold.

It's too harsh.

I stand up, stepping forward.

"You're doing it *wrong*—" I say aloud, as forcefully as I can. Before I even think twice.

Everyone stops.

They stare directly at me.

The auditorium is completely quiet. If I'm going to shrink away, now is the time.

But it's already too late.

I can't stop my voice.

"The way you're saying it—" I say, only slightly less loudly. "It's just not right." My voice trails away.

"Do you have a better idea?" the older boy steps toward me from the stage.

I do, I think to myself.

But I can't explain.

"Ignore her, Landon," says the other girl, impatiently.

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“Why don’t you come up here,” Landon calls out to me, across the auditorium, “and show me?” It’s an open invitation, not hostile.

Either I step forward, or sit back down.

Everyone in the room is waiting for my move. I look straight ahead, my arms by my sides. I’m painfully aware of everyone’s eyes.

“Just try—doing it more gently,” I say softly, sitting back down beside Kimmo again.

Kimmo stares at me, open eyed.

I feel Landon’s gaze upon me. But I no longer want to engage. I’m regretting I said anything at all. All I want is to hide myself inside a hole.

I stand up, quickly, and start to walk away. As if maybe no one will notice me.

Kimmo catches up, beside me.

“I didn’t know you were such a fan,” says Kimmo, enthusiastically.

“A fan?” I say.

The edge in my voice surprises me.

“Of Shakespeare,” she says.

“Huh?”

ZU

“The scene they were doing?” says Kimmo, obviously.
“It’s like super famous.”

I don’t know what she’s talking about.

I’ve never heard those words before in my life. I am nearly out of the auditorium. “Then what were you so upset about?” Kimmo is asking me.

That’s what unsettles me. I can’t figure it out. I concentrate and keep my eyes forward, ahead of me.

To keep myself from shaking.



At lunch I sit with Kimmo and Aisha, and another boy named Jaden, in an outdoor courtyard. It’s my favorite place at Trinity, with a patch of broad, blue sky and a comfortable space for eating.

“I heard you called out Landon,” Jaden says to me.
“Everyone is talking about it.”

“I didn’t call out anyone,” I say timidly.

Kimmo is streaming us, while I eat a cucumber sandwich. Across the courtyard, I watch Landon come up a stairway, talking to his friends. He turns away from the other boys, gazing in my direction.

ZU X ORI

"Uh oh—" says Kimmo.

"Here he comes," Aisha announces. "Do you know he did Hamlet last year?"

Now Landon is coming toward me. We observe each other from a distance.

Technically, this is eye contact.

But not really.

So here's the deal. And trust me—I know what I'm talking about. Sure, anyone can make eye contact from across a football field. And yes, it's eye contact.

It's a connection.

But to really get a sense of someone, you need to be closer. You can't really *feel* someone from far away. You need to be in their presence.

So it's not really *eye-contact*.

It's *eye-presence*.

That means you need to be close.

Like 5 or 6 feet.

Max.

ZU

Landon stands in front of us, as we all sit around. I stay focused on my cucumber sandwich. For some reason, I'm not ready to look up.

"Hi Landon," says Kimmo, brightly.

Landon turns briefly toward Kimmo. But I can't tell if he knows her.

"So," he says, returning to me. "I was thinking about your suggestion."

None of us say anything.

But I stop chewing, in mid-bite.

"Why don't you help me rehearse for The Lights?" he says invitingly. "Help me get it right."

Aisha and Kimmo look at me.

My eyes remain on my sandwich. But inside, my heart takes a leap. "What about your acting partner?" I say calmly, still gazing down.

"Vanessa?" says Landon. "She'll get over it."

I feel all my hesitation, from the auditorium—and all the reasons to say no. But is this a second chance? I know how I felt when Lauren brought up The Lights. That I didn't want to do it. But I know there's a part of me that does.

And it won't stay quiet.

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"Okay," I say.

Again, it just comes out.

"Great," Landon sounds pleased. "Tomorrow, same time?"

I look up, meeting him in the eye.

And I let myself hope.

After looking hundreds of people in the eye, I almost never hope. After so many meetings, I've lost some expectation.

But every once in a while. I hope.

After all.

All it takes is once.

I am meeting Landon's gaze. For a drawn-out instant, everything else disappears.

His eyes have a bright, beautiful charm. I feel like I'm surrounded by them. I feel a shiver, an excitement that runs slowly up my side.

One second has passed.

And there's a warmth, a friendliness. It's a feeling of being comfortable and accepted, at ease.

Landon smiles at me.

ZU

But something is missing.

I don't *feel* anything.

Not really.

Landon's eyes are beautiful. But after my initial shiver, that first rush of excitement, I feel empty. There's no depth to our connection. There's no power to it, and it barely touches me.

I can't get past it.

Two seconds have passed.

Or maybe it's his scent.

I guess I overlooked it, but Landon has a smell that's vaguely like cinnamon. It's a peculiar kind of scent. Whatever the reason, this isn't right. Landon is looking at me—but he's not *with* me.

I cut away.

It's been two seconds.

And I'm never wrong.

But I can still be disappointed.

"Tomorrow," I nod.

A moment ago, I was hoping for fireworks, for a celebration in the stars.

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Now I stare at my sandwich.

One of Landon's friends grabs hold of him, from behind, pulling him away. Landon glances back, before heading across the courtyard.

Kimmo looks at me, her eyebrows raised. The four of us walk out of the courtyard, down an outdoor walkway along the side of the school.

"That's exciting," says Aisha.

"Um yeah," I say.

"Zu, it's super cool," says Kimmo, expectantly. "Everyone knows Landon is gonna win this year. He came in second twice before."



A row of artwork adorns the walkway.

There are framed photographs, posters, and a collection of paintings.

A digital display hangs at the end.

Appearing on the screen are images of clothing, morphing into each other, glitching digitally into rainbow-colored static, then changing back to clothing again. I

ZU

pause in front of the display, the beautiful colored clothing holding my eyes.

“That’s Ori,” says Aisha, simply.

She’s looking at the display.

“What?”

I look at Aisha.

“Orion,” she explains. “He won The Lights the last two years. These are his costumes, from the school play.”

I take a step, toward a second display. This one contains only the image of a single white dress. The display zooms slowly into the dress, glitching again as if broken, before the screen fades to black.

I’m transfixed.

I want to see more.

But the screen remains black. I feel a chill, like my skin is covered in a cold, damp moisture. As if the air has just dropped twenty degrees.

Images fly through my mind.

Then disappear.

Too quick to catch.

ZU X ORI

I hear Kimmo speaking, distantly, her words not quite reaching me. "He was Lauren's protégé. They were super close. Inseparable," she says.

"Are you cold?" I turn to them.

They look at me, weirdly.

"Um, no."

The white dress reappears on the screen, cycling through its digital loop. For the next moments, I see nothing else. In my peripheral vision, the Trinity Rose courtyard seems to fade. Like a feeling I had once, before fainting. The chill cold wraps around my skin, through my clothing and into my bones.

For a split second, I see the images again. Like a glitch inside my own mind. But this time I catch it.

A thimble.

A green grasshopper.

A golden sun in the fields.

Then it's gone again.

"Zu, are you okay?"

I can hear Kimmo again.

"Yeah," I say, stepping away. I am breaking from my stupor. "I just—got a chill."

ZU

Kimmo and Aisha both observe me.

"Lauren never mentioned him," I say.

"That's because she's mad," Aisha tells me. "Ori went against her by dropping out."

"Dropping out?"

I'm re-focusing quickly. I can't imagine Lauren being mad at anyone. That hardly sounds like her.

"Did he really drop out?" Kimmo questions Aisha.

"That's what I heard."

"I heard he transferred—" says Jaden.

"Or graduated early—" Kimmo interrupts.

"To an art school in Italy," Jaden finishes his sentence. "Or was it an internship?" The others turn toward him. But I glance back to the bewitching white dress, cycling among the glitches and black.

I feel compelled toward it.

"Hermes would know."

"Who's Hermes?" I ask.

"His best friend."

"Are they *just* friends?" asks Aisha.

"You don't think?" Kimmo laughs.

ZU X ORI

"I'm just saying," Aisha shrugs her shoulders. "Ori never had a girlfriend." Everyone seems to know so much—about someone they know so little. My temperature is slowly returning to normal, as we approach the double doors at the end of the walkway.

Aisha opens the door, just as a bird flies out.

It surprises us all. I watch it lifting above the courtyard, then landing in a high treetop.



The rest of the day is a haze.

My last two classes, English and Chemistry, pass as lazily as the September day outside the window. I skip the bus ride home, walking instead.

I pop in my earbuds, taking New York one block at a time. I glance in the storefronts lining the street.

I don't look anyone in the eye.

I don't know why.

At my apartment, I take the elevator up.

It's my dad's last day, before his long conference in Boston. At dinner, he asks about my day. Before he leaves for the airport, we make our daily video call with my mom

ZU

and brother, back in Hong Kong. This always makes me miss them more.

I hug my dad at the door.

When he leaves, I wash the dishes.

I spread out my school materials, across the dining room table. I try to do some homework.

But I can't.

Finally I put on my headphones. I stare outward, then rise and cross the apartment, standing before our large, living room view. I look out across the city, in the twilight blue of dusk.

Like I'm the last person in the world.

I take a short shower, put on an old t-shirt, comb my hair and look in the mirror. I make a few faces and squint hard, as if deciding who I really am.

I get into bed, leaning back in my pillows, turn off the light and face the darkened ceiling.

But something itches at me.

I switch on my bed lamp and grab my tablet. I stare into the screen, eagerly excited.

I type: *Orion*

Search.

ZU X ORI

I get a bunch of pictures of the constellation—of course—
and a NASA spacecraft with the same name.

My finger lingers over the screen.

I type: *Orion Trinity Rose*

Tap.

There's a couple random sites about the school—and a
few odd videos. I scroll down.

One is titled: *Trinity Lights costume design*

From a year ago.

I click it.

There's a grainy, faraway image of the stage. I see a line
of kids in elaborate costumes, walking out in a row. At the
end, someone in a blue hoodie appears on stage. They
wave and quickly walk away.

Was that Orion?

I didn't even see their face.

I find another video. It's backstage, and the person in
the blue hoodie is there again.

But I still can't see their face.

I follow a few more links. I find a channel named: Orion.
In the playlist is a video.

ZU

It says: LIVE NOW

My breath stops, halfway up my chest.

I enter the stream.

On my screen, I see a plain looking room. There aren't any people. The only things in my view are a table and a sofa—and hanging on a stand, a dress.

It's the same white dress.

From the Trinity display.

But nothing is happening. Like someone left the camera on—by mistake. I wait a few seconds, but nothing happens. I consider switching off my tablet, when someone steps in the frame.

I lean forward.

The person walks to the white dress, then crouches down. They make an adjustment to the dress. They're wearing a hoodie and facing away from the camera. So I still can't see their eyes.

But I'm riveted.

I keep watching, entranced.

The person in the hoodie stops working. For a few seconds, they don't move at all.

I start to wonder if the stream is frozen.

ZU X ORI

Then I watch them turn their head, only a few inches,
and ever so slowly.

Into the camera.

Like they know they're being watched.

The person in the hoodie rises to their feet. And walks
directly toward the screen.

I've stopped breathing.

It's silly—but I feel I've been caught.

Wait—is my camera on?

Can they see me?

Of course not—

I compose myself.

They stand right in front of the screen, the hoodie over
their head. I can see their jawline—but the light is low, and
the hoodie hides their eyes.

They inch closer—looking right at me.

It's so intense, I don't breathe.

As if they'll hear me.

So I don't move. But I let my finger hover above the
screen. Say something, I tell myself.

My finger hovers above the *h*.

ZU

Then moves to the a.

Say something, I shout inside.

On my tablet, the person doesn't move. They're waiting for something. For me.

I can't take it anymore.

I lose my nerve.

I slam my tablet down on the bed. I feel my heart, leaping out from my chest.

I don't know what just happened.

I lie flat on my back, without moving, for who knows how long. Finally I switch off my light.

But I can't close my eyes.



EPISODE 2 **CRASH**

ORI

I stare at the camera.

I can't take my eyes off the camera. As if there's someone else on the stream.

Watching me.

But not in the normal way.

There's a feeling behind the camera that feels so familiar. But also so far away. Like something you know so well.

CRASH

But can't quite name.

I glance at the chat.

There's nothing unusual there. But I can't look away. I stare at the comments—waiting, weirdly anxious.

But nothing new appears.

I lean forward, type:

Hello?

And wait—

And wait a bit more.

But there is no response.

I step back from the screen. No, something has changed, it's over. The moment has passed. I don't know what's changed. But it's over.

I click, stopping the stream.

I step toward a mirror on the wall. A slim-looking boy in a blue-camo hoodie and torn jeans faces me, his eyes hidden beneath the hoodie.

I take a step closer.

And I flip back my hoodie.

I gaze at the features of my face. I have clear eyes, I wear a simple plastic necklace, and my hair is kind-of wavy

ZU X ORI

and kind-of straight. A red yarn bracelet sits on my wrist. I don't know what came over me. I was working on the dress, and then I just felt *something*.

Something so familiar.

Like a memory I can't place.

"Admiring yourself?"

I turn, quickly.

In the doorway is Hermes, a keen-eyed boy with a glowing face and thick, full hair. He shoots me a quick, knowing glance, while he crosses the room carrying a bowl of chips.

"Huh? Oh—"

"You alright, Ori?" Hermes crooks an eye.

"Oh, yeah," I reply, glancing back at my camera. "I just had a funny feeling."

Hermes crunches on a chip.

"Like what?" He's wearing a t-shirt that says *Rose*, a nickname for Trinity Rose.

"Like someone was watching me," I say. "But it felt so *familiar*." I expect Hermes to make a clever joke at my expense. But instead he looks at me sideways, like he understands.

CRASH

"I'm watching you, Ori," Hermes says to me. "To make sure you go back to school. Everyone's wondering where you are."

I shake my head, turning.

"Wonder is a virtue," I say.

I bounce a blue ball off the wall, then catch it again. Hermes plops down onto a canvas sofa, cradling his bowl of chips.

"They're gonna find out, bro—"

"From who?" I reply. "Every email from school gets relayed to my account. *My mother,*" I say in hand quotes, "has informed them about my condition: adolescent trauma from an allergic reaction. So my parents can continue their vacation in Italy. In peace."

"Allergic reaction," Hermes scoffs.

"To Lauren—" I say.

"You're still mad at her?"

"Of course."

I bounce the blue ball, quietly.

Hermes sits upright, dropping his chips and lifting his laptop in a single swoop.

"Ori," he gleams, "check this out."

ZU X ORI

His fingers fly over the keyboard, with a speed I can't even follow. "Hit the lights, will you?" Hermes says without looking up.

I dim the room.

"So, I cracked the code," Hermes beams, still dialed into his computer. "I wrote an extension, adjusted the z-axis—and boom!"

He smashes one last key.

I'm sitting beside Hermes. In the dimly-dark room, a solitary butterfly appears in front of us. It floats around dreamily, its wings beating in leisurely time, its color a soft and perfect pinkish blue. I'm mesmerized by its magical light and motion.

"Now watch," I hear Hermes.

The blue butterfly floats across the room, in loops and half-loops, before our eyes. I notice other butterflies appearing, fading in and out of darkness, like gentle, neon fireflies of the night. Soon the studio is filled with bluish butterflies of all sizes and shapes.

My eyes drop open.

"But how—" I say.

"Quiet."

CRASH

Hermes taps his keyboard.

The butterflies fade away, until only a single one remains, for one final loop.

We sit there, in the empty room.

From out of the darkness emerges a deep, throaty growl. A majestic, full-maned lion swaggers toward us. The lion grows larger, approaching steadily closer, its roar growing louder. It breaks into a run, its giant paws advancing toward us.

Hermes clicks away rapidly.

The lion morphs in full stride into a snorting, charging rhino. It's more terrifying than the lion, its thundering hooves shaking the floor of the studio.

I lean backward, in the couch.

It's nearly upon us.

Hermes clicks again, transforming the giant rhino into a tremendous dragon, wide wings fully extended, which swoops and levitates in the air before us, releasing an air-shattering shriek and blistering torrent of flaming breath directly at our heads.

We should be burnt to cinders.

But are not.

ZU X ORI

Hermes taps a key, the dragon vanishes, and we are left alone in the silent studio.

"It's called Pepper's Ghost," Hermes explains. "It's an old holographic trick. I hacked a dead project at my dad's company."

He pulls up a website, quickly.

There's a video of his dad, Ford Wright, explaining something on stage. Watermarked on the video is the Wright Institute branding, a logo of a digital tree that catches my eye.

"In the old days," Hermes mutes the sound, "they'd project holograms on a screen." He gets up, switching off a black box on the floor. "This is way better," he pats the box. "It's an ionizer. The projection gets reflected in the microscopic ions."

I'm used to Hermes' brilliance.

But even I'm speechless. "You could enter The Lights," I encourage him.

"That pony show?" he says.

"No, really—"

"So could you."

I stand up, walking away.

CRASH

"There's nothing for me at school," I say.

"We talked about this already," says Hermes, following me. "You're moody and you need to get over it and stop acting dumb."

"Dumb?" I say.

"You repeat me," he says.

"And you follow me," I say, turning around.

Hermes holds a broomstick. He unscrews the handle, pointing it at me. "Let's have a little duel. If I win—you get your butt back in school."

He tosses me the broom handle.

"Against the captain of the fencing team?" I say.

I toss it back at him. "Nah."

"You had your chance," Hermes reminds me. "I asked you to join the team."

He pokes at me annoyingly with the broomstick. I retreat across the room, Hermes after me. I slap the broomstick away, backtracking along a bookshelf. Hermes pursues me, grinning and tapping the broom handle against the books.

"Stop," I say.

"You surrender?"

ZU X ORI

He swings the broomstick at me. It's only half-speed, but quick enough I have to duck. A few books go flying from the shelf.

"I'm *serious*—" I say.

"So am I."

I grab a curtain rod, blocking his attack. We circle around the kitchen, scattering paper towels and wooden spoons.

Hermes lunges at me.

I slip, losing my rod. Hermes shoves the broomstick into my chest.

"Answer my riddle. I'll let up."

I'm flat on my back.

"Where do you need to go," Hermes riddles me, "to find fortune, fate and truth?"

"A dictionary," I say.

"Yes," he sighs. "But that's *not* the answer." I push the broomstick away, getting to my feet. Hermes doesn't hinder me.

I walk back across the studio, bothered.

CRASH

The white dress stands where I left it, before the livestream. I come near it, carefully, like a deer that could spring away at a sound.

I pick up my headphones from the table, place them over my head.

Press PLAY.

From across the studio, Hermes watches me. He says: "You can't run away, Ori."

I don't hear him.

I'm already in my head.

Hermes walks to the door of the studio. He turns, then calls out again: "Ori! Ori?"

I have music in my ears, my back to him.

Hermes watches me, then smiles to himself. He walks out the studio door.



I take a long breath.

I made this white dress a year ago.

In a flurry, one night. I knew exactly how it looked. I'd been imagining it for years. From the desert, where I grew up outside Los Angeles. From when I found the first photos

ZU X ORI

of my grandfather, who was a tailor. And even, somehow, before that.

It wasn't my usual style—the clothes I made for Trinity's plays. The white dress was about beauty, nothing else.

I used simple cotton and lace.

It felt so old-fashioned. So traditional. But who was I to get in the way? It was also timeless. Like an eternal, low-key wedding dress.

At The Lights, they loved it.

I didn't.

It didn't feel right.

It was exactly what I imagined. But it left me unsatisfied. It was perfect, but imperfect. Finished, but unfinished. Complete, but incomplete. I stashed the dress in a closet. My year went downhill after that. I had a sense that something had passed, like a feeling my future had ended. And it only got worse.

But recently, I pulled it out.

Because it's more than a dress to me.

It doesn't make sense, but in the presence of the white dress, I feel connected to something more than myself. Like a memory that I've lost.

CRASH

I adjust my headphones, studying the dress.

I take a seam ripper, detaching the left sleeve. This makes it more modern. A slow, pale moon rises outside my window.

I work away at the white dress. How long passes? Twenty minutes, two hours?

I have no idea.

I tinker with the neckline, the bands. I don't know what to change, but I keep trying. My eyes blaze. I step back, removing my headphones, struck with wonder and curiosity. I feel the presence of a hundred memories, just beyond my reach—all connected to the white dress.

Memories I can't remember.

Like a secret I should know about myself.

The white dress was always a mystery. When I studied the photos of my grandfather's tailor shop, in my mind it was the white dress I saw. I never dared to make it. It seemed too perfect. I started with simple things instead: a vest, clothes I imagined my grandfather might make, using YouTube as my tutor. Slowly I got better. I liked the feel of fabric, the touch of it. I made myself a suit. But in the back of my mind, there was always the dress.

ZU X ORI

By the time I got to Trinity, I had a style. I screen printed t-shirts, spray painted jeans. I'd sell them to the other kids. They asked me to do the costumes for the play. I agreed, but I always felt I was moving toward the dress. It was always about the dress.

I lift the remaining sleeve, holding the cloth.

I've always felt I had a secret.

As a child, I remember feeling that somehow, I was someone special. That I came from somewhere. That I'd done *something* in some distant past. That somewhere inside me was an amazing secret that would explain everything about me.

Have you ever felt this way?

That somewhere is a secret that explains everything about you.

That makes you make sense.

Where did I come from?

Why am I here?

I imagine ancient people, looking upward in wonder at the stars. Sometimes I feel this way about myself. I was born and experience life in amazing ways. But why?

Who am I?

CRASH

This is my secret. And somehow—in the presence of the white dress—I feel a clue.

“It’s only you and me,” I tease the dress. “What do you know about me?”

The white dress is mute.

“Not even a hint?”

Sometimes the memory feels so close.

I can almost sense sunlight on my shoulders, a feeling of happiness, a single tree on a hilltop. But it’s more than scenery. There’s an anticipation.

Something hopeful is about to happen. Above me the wide tree sways. There are buildings in the distance.

Am I making it all up?

This is the feeling: there is someone behind me. They have only just arrived. Or maybe, I have only noticed. But I feel this person behind me. And somehow, my future depends on her.

I gaze into the far corners of the studio, where the light does not quite reach.

And I turn around.

But of course, there’s no one there.

“Who are you?” I say aloud.

ZU X ORI

There is no reply.

I glance around the brick-walled studio, a converted warehouse at 71 Gansevoort Street, in New York's Meatpacking District. I go to an open window, leaning slightly outside. Across the street is the Whitney Museum and the High Line, the classy park built on an abandoned, elevated railway line.

"It's a case of amnesia," I sigh to myself.

I grab a leafy book of poems, flipping pages—as if my secret was hidden inside. I toss the book away and slump onto the sofa, gazing up at the brick wall. From upside down, I see the pinned up posters of my favorite artworks and fashion designs.

"Amnesia is what it is," I decide.

Suddenly I am exhausted. I sink down in the couch, rubbing my hands over my eyes.

My phone glows dimly in the darkness.

I glance at it, disinterested.

It's another email from Trinity Rose—a reminder about my absence. My eyes drift to the Trinity Rose logo, three roses inside a circle, then rest on the school motto: *Felix, Fatum, Veritas*.

CRASH

Fortune. Fate. Truth.

The answer to Hermes' riddle.

I remember him earlier, standing above me, pointing the broomstick: "*Where do you need to go,*" I hear Hermes quizzing me, "*to find fortune, fate and truth?*"

Trinity Rose.

I smile to myself, sleepily.

When I wake up, it's already dawn. I rustle my hands through my hair, clumsily. Outside the early streets are becoming bright. I stumble toward a coffee shop two blocks away.



ZU

I'm at Jack's again.

The morning sky is above the buildings. I'm sitting by the large window, with a few minutes before school, my matcha latte on the table. On my tablet, another grasshopper is taking shape.

The light outside is delicately white. A bird flutters, perched above the cobblestone street. I hear the door swing open. I look up.

ZU X ORI

A boy ambles in, approaches the counter and glances vaguely at the large chalkboard menu. He takes a few steps backward, as if deciding.

He orders, then glances at the menu again—there is something interesting about him—and then turns in my direction.

He steps toward me.

Instantly, I'm caught in his gaze.

Our eyes lock together. I can't look away. I can't even move. I sit there, with nowhere to turn.

We are both caught. Neither of us can look away. Or even breathe. I can only look in his eyes.

What is happening?

I can see straight inside of him—through his eyes. We are tied together—in this timeless moment—neither able to go anywhere, or do anything without the other. My body is in shock. I can't even think.

I can only look.

A whole second has passed.

Neither of us has moved.

His eyes are bottomless, clear and open. I feel this moment, exploding all around us. I'm totally exposed.

CRASH

There's nothing I can do. He can see everything about me—every emotion, every thought. It's impossible to hide anything about myself.

This is what I've been waiting for.

But I'm not ready.

For this.

A voice inside me shouts: *Stop. Look away, close your eyes, blink. You're too exposed—*

We can see everything about each other.

He can see every flaw I have. But I know if I stop now, this moment—born from total, unexpected opening—will be over forever. In this moment there is no compromise, no protection, no hiding of who I am. We are both, absolutely who we are.

In the background, I hear my fear again: *don't let him see you, smile, put on a face*. But the moment I do, this moment will end. So I silence the voice and with everything I have—I keep looking into his eyes.

Two seconds have passed.

Two seconds.

I've never been beyond this.

Now what?

ZU X ORI

I cannot break my gaze. I've never felt anything like this. From where he stands, I feel him melting, shattering behind his eyes. Somehow he knows me. I don't know how—but he knows me. We are riding some gigantic wave together, some magnetic wormhole or supernova explosion of a star. All I can do is match his gaze.

Three seconds.

I am about to break.

Neither of us has moved. Neither has blinked. The entire world has come to a stop. No sounds, no movement. Only deep amazement and truth.

And love.

How is this possible?

Already I feel I love him. There is no doubt, no decision. I love him with all of myself, for all my existence. I can feel his eyes inside of me, reaching me. We are connected, like leaves on the same branch.

Four seconds.

I've never felt such happiness. His eyes touch mine, so tenderly. It's a way I've never been touched.

How can this be?

CRASH

I don't blink or breathe, but I am beginning to see details now, peripherally. He is wearing blue, a sweater or shirt, jeans maybe. I hear the clack of the barista. I'm reminded where we are.

Five.

Every second binds us together. We are two particles racing together at maximum speed, bound only by the delicate bond of love. I am beginning to awaken from this trance. I am suddenly curious: Who are you? What does this mean? Are we bound together forever? A thousand curiosities wash over me at once.

And yet I don't dare speak.

I don't dare break this connection, this place of perfect understanding.

But it's time.

One of us has to say something. His eyes are burning into mine. Now it's time to speak.

Now it's time.

Six seconds.

He says:

"Hello."

I don't say anything at all.

ZU X ORI

His eyes say volumes, and then I say:

"Hi."

He steps closer.

We are still in the timeless space.

"Are you...drawing?"

"Yeah—" I pause. "I am."

He glances at my drawing, and our gaze is broken for the first time.

His eyes return to mine. It's the same silence, the same depth, even though we've spoken.

I push the tablet toward him.

"It's a grasshopper."

He looks at the drawing and me, at the same time. He is absolutely beautiful.

"Oh—that's good," he smiles.

"Thanks—"

Neither of us knows what to say. This is the first important moment of my life. That's all I know.

I force myself to say something, anything.

"I'm into drawing," I say. "It's my thing."

He looks at me.

CRASH

"I make clothing," he adds, clumsily.

"Oh."

What is there to say? We already know everything about each other. And yet we know nothing!

My alarm sounds off.

We both look quickly at my phone, and the spell is broken.

"Oh," I say, reminded of a meeting with Lauren. "I'm late for something—at my school."

I begin gathering up my things, but something feels wrong. This isn't how it's supposed to end. I should say something, but I can't think of anything. Do I ask his name? His phone number? That feels completely off. I need to say something, but I don't know what to do.

I'm getting up from my table.

He looks at me. He feels the same thing. Neither of us wants to part. But we don't know what to say.

We're together and being pulled apart.

"Which school?" he asks.

"Trinity."

"Trinity?" he repeats.

ZU X ORI

I am walking toward the door. He follows beside me, but our eyes are no longer meeting. We exchange a glance, nervously. I don't know what to do.

"Well," I smile quickly, "bye."

He says, "bye."



ORI

She's gone.

I watch her leaving through the window. The sunlight is in the sky above the buildings. Cars are passing left and right, while pedestrians walk briskly by. The girl in the green shirt is walking away, up the block, below the buildings in the light.

I stand alone inside of Jack's. From behind me, I hear the barista call out:

"Latte—"

I'm awakened from my stupor.

I'm no longer paralyzed. I step outside, into the busy sound of the street. I head quickly for the corner where the girl in green was going, searching up and down both sides of the street.

CRASH

But I don't see her.

Anywhere.

I'm at the corner, looking everywhere. What a fool I was! To let her just walk away? But wait! I see a flash of green, disappearing around another corner.

I'm passing people on the sidewalk. They turn toward me, whirling and jumping aside.

I don't care.

I round the corner.

There! I see her green shirt, through the traffic ahead of me. I'm running, dodging cars in both directions. The sun is blinding my eyes. I catch another glimpse of green, then lose it behind a bus. When the bus finally passes, the girl in green has disappeared.

Again.

I swivel left and right, madly.

There are cars and people in every direction. I focus on every face, near and far.

No, no, no, no.

I can't lose her now.

I pick a direction, starting to run. Immediately I stop, then change direction. It's been seconds since I've seen her.

ZU X ORI

I am losing her trail.

Oh, there!

Up the stairs to the High Line, I see her green shirt in the sunlight. I step blindly into the street—a car slams its brakes, the driver glaring at me. I dodge a taxi, a bicyclist and I'm running toward the stairs. Pigeons scatter, as I dash through their wings.

I'm running like a madman.

Up the stairs, two and three at once.

I'm on the High Line. She is ahead of me, not far—on the narrow walking path. I fly after her and coming near, slow my steps and catch my breath, ever so.

I am almost upon her.

Twelve steps behind, now seven.

Five, four, three.

And two...

She spins, taking one step toward me. Her hands find my face—she pushes her lips to mine. She is kissing me—we are kissing—and the High Line and New York City are revolving around us. We are locked together, in a kiss that cannot and will not end.

She breaks away.

CRASH

She looks shell-shocked. She takes two steps back, gasping for breath. Then turns, running away.

I stand there, unbelieving.

I move, following after her. She rounds a bend, behind two small trees. I am right behind her. She is starting down a flight of stairs.

I grab her wrist on the railing.

She turns, her eyes burning.

I am spellbound.

Is this another eternity?

Maybe.

"I'm Ori," I say.

She breaks free—or I let go.

The girl is running down the stairs. She disappears down the stairs, and this time I don't follow.



ZU

Ori? *Orion*?

That was Orion?

What? What?

ZU X ORI

What!?

My memory rewinds in a blur. I piece the pictures together—the hoodie last night, the person in front of the camera, the presence. He didn't have his hoodie up. It was the same blue hoodie.

I'd never seen his face.

Ori? What!

I am staggering down the street, in a hopeless daze. My life is over—that's what it feels like. I can't hold in my emotions. I don't even know what I'm feeling. Am I crying—or am I laughing? There are tears and I'm wiping them off my cheek. What just happened?!

Why am I crying?

I want to scream. For joy, for my whole life up to now, for something I've held inside, that I didn't even know existed. The power of true love. I'm passing strangers in the street. They're turning to look at me. They're not used to seeing someone like this.

I've never been like this.

Every sensation is blurring, the sunshine, sounds of traffic, people, buildings and signs. I'm tripping through the New York morning. I don't hear—and hardly see—any of it.

CRASH

I'm on autopilot. What I'm feeling inside makes all of New York seem like a dot, a 10-watt bulb, a mirage, a daydream.

A star is exploding inside me.

Did I kiss him?

I did.

Memories of the last minutes flash over my eyes. I am overwhelmed with joy. The kiss, the kiss, the coffee shop—I was drawing, and then—our eyes. What was that? No, really—what was that? In that instant, those seconds, that eternity—Agnes Zhu was destroyed.

I was born.

Do I even know what he looks like?

Yes. Exactly.

I must still be crying, because an older man in a grey shirt is approaching me. He's asking if I'm okay. I nod, say yes, I am. I feel my face, wet with tears.

Oh, Lauren—you're not going to believe this!

I'm not afraid of anything anymore. I just died a million times, in a span of six seconds. What's left to be afraid of? I have total confidence in myself. And in love. I was born moments ago. All that came before—myself, Hong Kong, my parents—was like a passing dream.

ZU X ORI

I stop a cab, get in.

I message Lauren:

“Coming.”

The daylight scatters the morning as we drive. I’m replaying the kiss in my mind. I stepped out of character. I was drawn to him. Something came over me that’s never happened before.

I feel I’m on ambrosia.

It’s like a wave of bliss. Everything is beautiful in the streets and New York buildings, in my life. I still can’t believe what’s happened. I’m thinking of him—of Ori—and smiling so hard right now. I’m giddy, laughing, alive. The sunshine sparkles on the cars in the street. The taxi I’m in speeds through an intersection—I see a blur to my right—as a black SUV smashes straight into us.



Glass and metal explode all at once.

It’s like I’m at the center of a bomb, everything is flying through the air, the windshield collapses and rips away, the car frame is crushed like a branch, the airbag is exploding, glass shards are flying.

CRASH

We're spinning through the intersection. I see everything moving at supersonic speed—and in slow motion. I can see the crosswalks. I see the faces of the pedestrians, other cars in the intersection, the traffic light, still yellow. The bomb is still exploding.

Impact.

Something strikes my head, hard.

My taxi—with the SUV pinned to its side—slides to a stop at the edge of the intersection. People around us stand shocked, then begin rushing toward us.

I can't tell. I lost consciousness long ago.



Something strange is happening.

I'm not in the cab anymore. I can see everything that's happening at the crash. *But I'm not there.* The taxi and SUV are completely destroyed. Could anyone actually survive that? I'm seeing it all from an extremely wide angle. The street is strewn with wreckage.

Broken glass and metal.

Seconds are passing. There are sirens, police cars. There are three or four, blue and white lights flashing. The

ZU X ORI

street is closed down, people stare horrified from the sidewalks. A firetruck and ambulance arrive. They are pulling someone from the wreckage.

It's me.

I should be scared—so scared right now.

But I'm not there.

I'm watching it all from above.

The ambulance is racing through the streets. There's a desperation in the way they're driving. All the traffic is moving out of the way, they're running red lights, driving through the street. I'm lying on a stretcher, I'm strapped down and my head is in some kind of plastic brace. My face is blank, and my eyes are closed.

I'm not moving.

And now something else is happening. Oh my God—what is this? It's like time has stopped, or stretched out—or doesn't exist anymore. No, it's overlapping. Time is overlapping. The ambulance is driving, but I—

I am lying on my back, dressed in white.

I'm no longer in the ambulance. The streets of New York have disappeared. I'm on my back, motionless. All around me it's cold.

CRASH

And dark.

Beneath me is a hard slab. I can't open my eyes. I lie there, unable to move, dressed in white.

Someone is coming near me.

It's Ori—

Oh my God, oh my God.

What is this?

I can see Orion standing over me. My eyes are closed, but I see him from above.

He stands absolutely still.

It's Ori.

But it's also not Ori.

It doesn't look like him—but it's him.

His features are different. We are both different—it's a different place, a different time. It's the boy I just kissed, from Jack's Coffee—but it's a different time.

I am with him then.

The ambulance is driving, red lights flashing. I can see myself, lying in two places at once, the stretcher and the hard slab.

With Orion standing over me.

ZU X ORI

There are other images.

We're at my father's house. It's a long time ago. We are in the garden. We act different, we look different—my skin is tanned or more olive. My hair is finer and lighter.

But it's us!

Orion and I are in love. It's a force so powerful. My father's house is large and beautiful. My parents are there, but I can't tell them about Orion.

Our love is a secret love.

A tidal wave of memories crashes over me. Orion.

Orion.

But that wasn't your name—

Your name was different.

I see us together in the garden. The pictures are like roses, blooming in my mind.

My clothes are elegant and ordinary. It's day-to-day wear, but it has a handmade grace. I'm wearing a white dress with sleeves of lace. The weather is balmy and warm, even in the nights. The sun feels different here, and yet familiar. Even the earth where I walk feels different. I am somewhere else—in every sensation. I *am* someone else. And yet it's also me.

CRASH

It's who I used to be.

We plan to marry, Orion and I. No one can know—our families hate each other. They would never allow it. But nothing matters, compared to our love.

A priest in a robe is marrying us.

I have never felt such joy.

It's a holy joy, almost religious, as if something sacred and spiritual has happened. The priest is finished, and we are married before God.

It's a secret wedding.

We're going to wait to tell everyone. There's a special reason. We hope to bring our families together. We hope our love will set an example.

We want to tell them together.

But now—turmoil!

I see other images, other memories. My brother is crazed. Impulsive and violent, he is hardened and filled with hate. He doesn't trust anyone. He doesn't understand love. He's found out about us, somehow.

He wants to kill Orion.

I am living in a nightmare.

ZU X ORI

My brother grabs his sword. He's leaving to kill Orion. He pushes me aside at the doorway, as I try to stop him. The sun is standing at midday high.

There will be death today.

In the background, I see the ambulance driving.

We are arriving at the hospital. The ambulance is coming to a stop outside the emergency room. The paramedics throw open the rear doors and the driver rushes out.

They carry out the stretcher.

They wheel me past the hospital doors. I am lying motionless. The medics are pushing the stretcher into one of the emergency rooms. The doctors are there, gathered around me.

Again I would be scared.

But I'm not there.

I'm in both places, and neither.

In the emergency room and with my brother, as he storms off under the sun. I feel his hate, his sword glinting in the heat.

I know what happens next.

No, no, no!

CRASH

My brother—his sword drawn—has found Orion and his friends. But Orion won't fight him. He loves me too much. My brother won't be denied.

He attacks Orion's friend.

Now, swords fly!

They are fighting to the death. Orion tries to stand between them, to restore the peace—but, no—knave, my brother, sneaks an attack and stabs Orion's friend! He staggers, wounded, laughing, pretending to smile. Everyone is watching. He leans upon Orion, whispering in his ear. Then he stands tall, holds his side and screams in agony: "*A plague on both your houses!*"

He falls over, dead.

No!

Orion rushes my brother, blind with rage. The two of them are fighting, neither giving ground. But Orion is possessed—insane with grief and rage. He batters my brother, who struggles to defend himself, until finally—Orion thrusts his sword into him.

My brother slumps to the ground.

His blood spills into the earth.

I am grief's plaything.

ZU X ORI

Orion stands in the sun, sword lowered. He kneels by his fallen friend. Our marriage is impossible now. By killing my brother, Orion has broken the law. He will be banned from the city.

We can never be together.

I descend into despair.

Both our families are filled with sorrow.

In the hospital emergency room, the EKG beeps and flashes. The doctors are watching over me. My face is pale and serene. At my parents' house, I collapse into my bed. What is worth living for now? I care neither for life nor death. Let it be death.

It's all the same to me!

My father is grieving with rage. All the house is weeping and mourning. Orion is gone and I am alone. My mother, the viper, is screaming for Orion's death. But she's using a different name.

That wasn't his name.

What was his name?

Each time I hear her, I grow apart from her. My heart is with Orion, who I'll never see again.

I'm with the friar who married us.

CRASH

He's a good man, devoted to God and Orion's friend.
He gives me a sleeping potion. We're going to fake my
death—and in two days I'll awaken to be with Orion. It
sounds so crazy, but I have nothing left to lose.

The friar hands me the vial.

It's sweet to my lips, I drink it down.

I return home and soon feel dizzy. The world grows slow
and heavy, as I slump into bed.

When I awaken, I am lying in the dark.

My mind is hazy, I can't think. I feel cold and wonder
where I am. There is someone lying against me. I feel the
warmth of their body. *Orion*, I sigh. The friar's plan,
somehow, it's worked. Our nightmare is over! I feel a joy
unlike any since this ordeal began. My love—my love is with
me again. All worldly worries are gone. An unimaginable
relief crashes over my soul. I turn to Orion—there is
torchlight now, and yet he moves not.

Awaken, my love.

Our distance is done. Be with me now.

Orion lies still and his body limp. What's this? I spy a vial
in his hands. It's poison to my nose. What? *What!?* I am
struck still.

ZU X ORI

How? How? Why?

I am gasping, but no breath escapes.

Have you gone before me, my love, into the everlasting night? *And why?* And why? No reason. No reason.

I wail, a sound heard to heaven.

I hold Orion's dagger in my hands. It feels sharp as day, pressed against my white dress. I follow you, my love, wherever you will go. In this world or the next, I will be with you. This I vow, before all saints and angels.

I plunge the dagger into my chest.

Blackness.



EPISODE 3 **VERONA**

VERONA, ITALY, PRESENT DAY

A black cat saunters up Via Dante Alighieri, a narrow alleyway in the heart of Verona. The walls of the buildings are striped, warmly red and white. The black cat picks a leisurely path in the sunlight.

From the opposite direction, a boyish young person is approaching. He wears short, dark hair and a loose, black shirt and necklace.

The two walk toward each other.

ZU X ORI

In a few strides, they meet.

The young person kneels on the stone alleyway, stroking the cat tenderly. It nestles among his legs, then continues on its way. The young person rises up, takes five steps and stops.

As if stricken.

They brace their left hand along the wall. Then slowly collapse to their knees.

Their head bowed, eyes shut.

One palm against the wall.

Breathing.

In their heart is a searing pain, mixed together with an excited, guilty pleasure. After many moments, they pull themselves to their feet.

Quickly they exit the alleyway.

They turn toward the Piazza delle Erbe, Verona's main square. A marketplace of umbrellaed street vendors, fruit stands and tourists lies under a brilliant blue sky. Crossing the stone square, they circle the 700-year-old marble fountain of the Madonna of Verona.

CRASH

At the far end of the square, the young person enters a beautiful, three-story stone palazzo. Bolted onto the wall is a heavy bronze plaque. It reads:

CAPULET

VERONA

VERONA

Inside is a high glass atrium.

Employees in red smocks circulate among customers, who examine small perfume bottles and exchange longing glances. On each bottle is stenciled the Capulet logo: a small white dagger.

The person in black pays no attention.

They move directly to the back of the floor room. Snippets of conversations catch their ears:

"It has a very fine head note."

"And your most expensive fragrance?"

"For today's woman, mandarin orange and sandalwood signal assertiveness and flexibility."

The young person approaches an elegant, double wooden door, which automatically slides open. Inside are men and women in white lab coats, busy at their stations. Everyone notices the young person, but no one meets their gaze directly. The young person walks past, up a spiraling, marble staircase.

Two stylish employees are descending.

They nod and say, "Maestro."

ZU X ORI

At the third-floor landing is a heavy door. The young person clenches their right hand, before reaching out and turning the knob.

Statues and old books fill the room.

Toward the edge of the room, a wall-sized display comes to life. Appearing on the screen is an elderly Asian man, seated with his hands clasped. The person in black walks directly toward the screen.

He raises his eyes.

"Juliet is back," he says.

Gradually, the older man lifts his eyebrows, leaning slowly forward. "Are you certain, Tai?" he says, a mix of curiosity and caution.

The young person rubs their right hand. "Her signature is unmistakable, uncle," he says.

The older man stares gravely at Tai. "Do I need to remind you how important this is?" he says. "We've waited for over five hundred years."

"Believe me," Tai stares back. "I know."



I hurry up the hilltop.

VERONA

Verona lies below me, outstretched in red brown rooftops, curving beyond the Adige River. Through the white, quickly moving clouds, the sunshine brightens and fades along the hillside.

Ahead of me is Castel San Pietro, an imposing walled fortress commanding the city. I lift the ends of my blue dress, cutting across the high grass.

I came as quickly as I could.

But I'm already late.

I reach the overlook, the place we are supposed to meet. The young boy stands under a wide tree, his back to me, gazing in contemplation or dream, across our home city of Verona.

I approach, with a determined step.

Ah, he senses I am here!

He turns around.



Tai re-enters the perfume lab, where the technicians in white coats hurry back and forth. He heads toward a young woman with platinum hair.

"Lucrezia—" he calls ahead.

ZU X ORI

The young woman pretends not to hear. She dabs a thin paper strip into a bottle of red perfume. She waves the paper under the nose of another young technician. His eyes are blindfolded.

“Daffodils,” he smiles.

Lucrezia switches smelling strips, testing a second perfume, this one a slightly deeper red. The young man changes expressions.

He appears to be recalling something.

“Seashells,” he says curiously.

“Yes,” says Lucrezia. “But when?”

The young man concentrates. He swallows. “On the beach, with my mother. I was twelve, no, eleven—when I was eleven.” Tai watches the experiment, impatiently, his arms folded. Lucrezia places a third paper strip under the young man’s nose, the deepest red of all.

“And this one?” she asks.

The young man inhales deeply.

Almost immediately he recoils, his face contorting, as if escaping from the scent. A line of perspiration appears on his brow.

“I—I don’t know,” he answers, nervously.

VERONA

“Didn’t I tell you?” Tai interrupts Lucrezia’s experiment. “No negative memories. Who wants a perfume to feel terrible?”

Lucrezia casts a downward eye.

The technician removes his blindfold. Lucrezia puts away the perfume and pats him on the arm. “It’s okay,” she says gently. “You did really well.”

She swivels toward a ruby-colored light, hovering on the tabletop. “Did you get that, RITA?” she says. The ruby light wavers in a pleasant, female voice, “We’re getting closer, Lucrezia.”

Tai pulls Lucrezia away from the table. “You and I are taking a little trip,” he says.

“Now?” she asks.

“Adesso—” Tai repeats loudly, walking away.

Lucrezia glances at her lab table, littered with small glass vials and testing strips. RITA wavers in red, “Safe travels, Lucrezia.”

Tai has already disappeared down the hall. Lucrezia rushes to catch him, removing her lab coat. They step into a sun-drenched courtyard. A dark sedan and a driver are waiting for them.

ZU X ORI

Lucrezia halts. "Where are we going?"

"New York," replies Tai.

"Why?"

Tai meets her gaze.

"Juliet is there," he says.

Lucrezia stares at Tai, then enters the car. The sedan winds through the narrow, earth-toned Verona streets. Lucrezia sits beside Tai in the backseat. She is silently solving a puzzle in her mind.

"Juliet—" she whispers.

She turns to Tai.

"But that means—"

"The prophecy is true," says Tai, triumphantly. "Did you ever doubt it?"

"A little—" says Lucrezia, giddy.

She pauses a moment. "But how do you know?"

"No one has a presence like her," Tai looks away. Lucrezia feels eager and anxious at once. "Now we can finish our work," she says.

Tai stares out the window, silently.

VERONA

The sun-colored Italian buildings flash by. Lucrezia looks reflectively at Tai. "So you never experienced a negative past-life memory?"

Tai sits stone-faced.

"There were a few," he says grimly.

They enter a hangar near the airport. Tai and Lucrezia stroll toward a small private jet, climbing on board. Lucrezia eases into a plush chair, while Tai chooses the sofa. The plane shreds the runway, breaking the sky.

"Where in New York?" asks Lucrezia.

Tai grins.

"You're going to tell *me*," he says.

Lucrezia looks at Tai, plainly.

She reaches into her pants pocket, removing a small glass vial. Inside the vial is a deep blue liquid. Lucrezia gazes into it, mesmerized.

"It's a poor sort of memory that only works backward," she says.

She holds the vial, chest-height.

And removes the top.

Takes a breath.

ZU X ORI

Closes her eyes.

And immediately begins seeing images.

The majestic New York skyline appears, the heavy brown buildings and streets below. Quickly the images accelerate. In rapid succession, Lucrezia sees herself and Tai walking in a white corridor, a man with red-rimmed glasses, an audience standing in applause, Ori kissing Zu on a rooftop, the sharp edge of a knife, cars racing under a black storm, Zu standing under stage lights, Lucrezia's own face in tears, and finally—an open stage in an empty theater with deep red seats.

Her eyes open.

"It's a theater."

"New York is *full* of theaters," Tai admonishes her.

Lucrezia dismisses him.

"I'll find it," she insists.

She hesitates.

"There's one more thing," she says. When Tai doesn't respond, she says, "They've already met."

Tai's eyes dim like black coal.

"But it's early," Lucrezia adds.

VERONA

They face each other intensely, while a well-dressed attendant appears with a silver plate. On the plate are gelato and silver spoons.

Tai helps himself.

"I love gelato," he relaxes.

"So," Lucrezia pauses thoughtfully. "What happens when we find her?"

Tai waves his spoon in the air, like a playful conductor. His eyes sparkle, darkly.

"We bring her home," he says.



ORI

I'm coming back on the High Line.

The morning sunshine blinds my eyes. I walk on the walkway, into the orange light.

It was only ten seconds ago.

That changed my life.

Her eyes.

I entered the coffee shop. I took one step, and then—her eyes. I couldn't let go.

ZU X ORI

Her eyes.

There's no going back.

I don't even know her name.

I call Hermes.

"Hermes—where are you?"

"On my way to school?" I hear Hermes reply. "Where are you?"

"Something happened. I need you."

"I'll come after school."

"She goes to Trinity Rose," I say.

"Who?"

"I don't know—"

"Ori, calm down."

"She goes to our school!"

"Well," says Hermes, "maybe you should too."

"Get over here."

"After class—" he starts to say.

I hang up.

The morning sunshine blinds my eyes. I walk on the walkway, into the orange light.

VERONA



ZU

Professor Lauren is standing over me.

I blink slowly, squinting into the harsh ceiling lights. I have no idea where I am. The room feels cold and sterile, and while Professor Lauren appears calm, she also seems concerned.

I move my arm. Oh, pain!

My body is sore all over. I can't move a limb without everything aching.

I suddenly feel scared.

Lauren leans gently closer. In her calming presence, I relax just a bit. Lauren looks at me compassionately, her dark eyes tender.

I'm so glad she's here.

"You're okay, Zu," she says.

I don't say anything.

"Your tests came back fine," says Lauren. "They say you can go. I already spoke to your dad."

Tests.

What tests?

ZU X ORI

At once I understand: I'm in the hospital. But how did I get here? And why?

I don't remember anything.

I focus on Lauren to ground myself. As if she can make everything alright. A nurse walks into the room. He wears blue hospital scrubs, has short hair and a friendly manner. And a cute smile.

"You took quite a hit today," he sounds upbeat, which means I'm probably okay. "You're a lucky girl."

"Your family's out of town?" he asks.

"Yah," I say quietly.

"Well, it's a good thing you had Ms. Lauren," he says. "She came right away."

He winks and pats me on the arm.

I raise myself gently to a sitting position. I have an IV bandage on my arm. My back and shoulders are stiff as boards.

I make a twisted face.

I notice my backpack on the floor, beside my shoes. Something about this jogs my memory. I sit there, remembering the coffee shop—and the kiss. Did that really happen?

VERONA

"Zu, are you okay?" says Lauren.

"Yeah," I say distantly, "I'm fine."

The nurse returns with a wheelchair. He's offering me a ride. "I think I can walk," I say.

"Take a chance," he smiles at me.

I'm in no mood to argue. I slide into the wheelchair, and we glide through the hospital hallways packed with doctors and patients, going here and there. I'm glad I accepted the nurse's offer. As we roll through a maze of corridors, I drift back to the morning at Jack's Coffee.

It seems like a dream.

Or years ago.

We exit the sliding glass doors. Outside the humid air greets me immediately. It's a relief compared to the sterile hospital. Lauren takes over behind my wheelchair. I take a long, deep breath, look around hazily and see an ambulance parked at the curb.

I'm jolted awake.

Oh God.

Instantly I remember the ambulance ride. Or rather, seeing myself inside it.

And everything else.

ZU X ORI

Was that actually real?

I must look completely shocked, because Professor Lauren is leaning over me.

“Woah, what’s happening?” she says.

I can only shake my head.

“I just need a minute,” I say.

Oh my God, it’s all coming back to me. Everything I felt inside—or rather above—the ambulance. Orion, my marriage, my brother and his death—the memories are as real as my life now.

I don’t know how this is possible.

But it’s all completely real.

Professor Lauren is giving me space. We’re driving through the city streets. I feel I’m living in two worlds at once. I can’t make sense of it.

I don’t even try.

I watch the tall beige buildings of New York City, passing like distant citadels. I’m different now.

That’s the first thing I feel.

I feel older. Or wiser.

“What time is it?”

VERONA

"It's late afternoon," says Lauren.

Professor Lauren glances at me. I don't know what to say, or even how to begin.

"Lauren?" I say.

"Yes?"

Lauren is glad I'm talking.

"Something happened. After the crash."

I wait for Lauren to respond. When she doesn't, I take a breath, hesitate, and say, "I could see everything that was happening. I was unconscious—but I could see it all, the ambulance, the wreckage, everything."

Lauren's eyes seem to flicker.

"And then—" I pause, unsure if I should continue. "I started having memories. That I've never had before. About someone I met this morning."

I say it all very carefully.

"This morning?" Lauren looks confused.

"Ori—" I say.

"You met Orion?"

"I kissed him."

"You what?" Lauren turns to me.

ZU X ORI

I still can't get over it. That wasn't like me. But it gives me a warm feeling, thinking about it.

Lauren's eyes return to the road.

"We had this crazy connection," I tell Lauren, as calmly as I can. "And after the crash—I had all these memories about us. Like we'd already known each other." I look over carefully, meeting Lauren's gaze.

I couldn't say this to *anyone* else.

"Is that crazy?" I say.

"What did you remember?" Lauren asks, earnestly.

Instantly I feel relieved.

This is why I love Lauren so much. I know she believes in me.

"Well," I say, still in a strange daze, "it was a long time ago. But it was us. I, we—" I'm not sure what to say. "Our families hated each other—so we got married in secret." Now I can't stop talking. "But my brother hated Orion. He tries to kill him—"

"Orion from school," Lauren confirms.

"I know, I know—" I say. "It's weird."

Lauren listens, patiently.

VERONA

“But Orion kills my brother instead,” I continue. “He has to flee the city. We try to be together, but it all goes wrong. Ori takes poison and—I kill myself.”

It sounds so embarrassing, really.

Lauren just stares ahead. I’m afraid to say more, so we drive in silence.

We pull into the garage at Lauren’s building.

I grab my backpack from the trunk. We take the elevator to Lauren’s apartment, on the top floor. Lauren shows me to her bedroom, I take off my shoes and rest a moment on her bed.

When I close my eyes, I’m asleep.



ROMEO

Across the river is Verona.

I wait under a wide tree. Longingly I gaze upon the low rooftops of the city, saving this image to memory.

Now I sense someone behind me.

I turn around.

ZU X ORI

Facing me is a beautiful girl in a long, blue dress. Her hair sweeps over her face in the breeze. A silk scarf is woven through her hair.

She looks at me directly.

"Juliet couldn't come," she says.

My heart plummets toward an abyss. "Did she read my note?" I ask, helplessly.

"Yes," says the girl, still looking in my eye, "and was ready to go with you to Mantua." Simply hearing these words, I am uplifted.

"But her parents also saw the note," says the girl. "And have held her inside the house."

"Held?"

"The entire Capulet house is mad," the girl explains. "They are crazed with hate."

My spirit is crushed.

Now it's too late.

My future is growing dark.

"Juliet gives you this," she says.

The girl in the blue dress steps toward me, pressing a folded paper into my hand.

VERONA

Her blue eyes look in mine.

“Go well, Romeo,” she says, sadly.

She hurries away, leaving me by the tree.



ZU

I don't know where I am, again.

I'm in a room I've never been before. The sky is faintly blue outside the windows, but I can't make sense of my surroundings. For a few moments, I can't even remember who I am.

It doesn't last for long.

The large pillows beneath me bring me back to Lauren's bedroom. I came in here to lie down.

A long time ago.

Judging by the color of the sky.

I roll onto my side, facing the blue windows. I stay in this position a while. There's a warm smell of celery and tomatoes drifting on the air. Finally, I shift my legs over the side of the bed.

Surprisingly, I feel much better.

ZU X ORI

Almost normal again.

As if nothing had happened. As if all of today was actually just a dream.

It's a comforting feeling.

I emerge from Lauren's bedroom, following the warm smells. I make my way through a softly lit living room and carefully toward the kitchen, where Lauren is standing at the stove. She turns toward me.

"Hi, I made soup," she says warmly.

"I can smell it," I smile.

Lauren brings two bowls of vegetable soup into her study. I sit down on the sofa, with Lauren in an upholstered chair and a coffee table between us. Her large dog, Lorenzo, lounges at the base of a ceiling-high bookshelf.

The low-lamp warmth of Lauren's study relaxes me. Lauren brings over a teapot on a bamboo tray, filling our teacups. She crosses the room, retrieving a large book from her impressive bookshelf.

She places it on the table.

In front of me.

"This is the story you told me," Lauren says. "On the way here, in the car."

VERONA

I look down at the book. On the cover is a scene of two young people on a balcony. The title is *Romeo and Juliet*, by William Shakespeare.

I look at Lauren, mute.

Quickly, I am coming back to reality. I feel anything could happen next.

"Have you read it?" she says.

I look at Lauren.

"No," I say.

I feel a little embarrassed. I fancy myself a storyteller, but I've never read Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, only the most famous play of all time. "It's a love story," I say, trying not to sound ignorant.

Lauren flips open the cover.

"You've never read it?" Lauren asks me again. As if she didn't hear my response.

"No," I repeat.

Lauren begins turning pages of the book. "It's about the Montagues and the Capulets," she tells me. "Romeo is a Montague and Juliet is a Capulet." The pages of the book are full of beautiful drawings. "Their families are feuding,"

ZU X ORI

says Lauren, "so Romeo and Juliet can't be together. They marry in secret."

Lauren looks at me.

I feel unnerved, my stomach clenching.

I turn the book around, flipping its pages myself. The illustrations are scenes of sword fighting and death, of a priest and two young people being married, and the young girl killing herself with a dagger.

"Is this a trick?" I say, suspiciously.

These are the scenes of my memories. But not exactly! It's like seeing one's own story—but from the outside in. Like someone else was telling the story.

"No, Zu," says Lauren, calmly. She edges back from the table, giving me space.

"What are you saying?" I say.

"I'm not sure."

For the first time, I can't completely trust Lauren. I'm not sure what's happening. How could this be a trick? Lauren would have had to get inside my memories. At the hospital maybe? And then make a book of it?

My mind goes in crazy directions.

VERONA

Lauren holds my gaze, then slowly draws the book back toward her. "Can I ask you some questions?" she says carefully. "Let's see what you remember."

I watch Lauren, silently.

"Where did Romeo and Juliet meet?"

"I don't know," I say, defensively.

This wasn't part of my memories. I don't even know anything about Romeo and Juliet, whoever they are—which is actually relieving to me. Maybe this is all explainable, after all.

"Okay," says Lauren, continuing. She looks down at the page. "In what city then?"

I haven't a clue.

"Verona," answers Lauren, and after a pause, "Italy."

"Right," I deadpan.

I'm 0-for-2. Somehow this reassures me, like I'm proving my innocence. I would feel cheap if my memories were in any old book. But something happens when I hear the name *Verona*.

The sound has a familiar ring.

Lauren flips another page.

ZU X ORI

"Who married them?" Lauren looks me in the eye, across the table.

"The priest," I say.

I'm uncomfortable knowing this. I mean, you could argue it's a pretty logical guess.

Except I didn't guess.

"Who attended the wedding?" Lauren asks.

"It wasn't a wedding," I say. My certainty is unnerving. "It was just the three of them."

Lauren shifts her position, uneasily. "And why was Romeo banished from Verona?" she asks me.

Again, I don't know about *Romeo*. In my memories, it was Orion who was banished. Does that mean Orion is Romeo? I don't know. But the sound of the name *Romeo* stirs my heart.

Deeply.

I look down at the floor.

"Because he killed my brother," I say.

"You mean cousin, Zu," Lauren corrects me. "Tybalt is Juliet's cousin."

I stare at Lauren, vaguely.

VERONA

I'm saying the name to myself:

Tybalt

I look at the image in the book, of the fallen Tybalt. "No," I say, "he was her brother."

Lauren smiles, looking amused. "Zu, are you saying Shakespeare is wrong?"

I raise my teacup, taking a slow sip. I'm surprising myself. I've always been confident, but never bold. "Nothing against Shakespeare," I say. "It's just that Tybalt is her brother. That's all."

"How do you know?" Lauren sits back.

She sounds defensive, like I've dared to insult Shakespeare. Now it's Lauren's turn to feel uncertain. Even though I've known Lauren for a few weeks, this is the first time we've talked as equals.

I say the only thing I can.

"I was there."

It comes out stronger than I expect. "Tybalt killed Orion's friend—that's what started it all."

"Mercutio," Lauren says.

I feel a shiver up my spine, rising to my neck. Yes, that name feels right.

ZU X ORI

I don't know what rabbit hole this is.

But I am in it.

"We had a plan," I say all at once. "It was the priest's idea. I was going to fake my death—but I woke up in the dark in my family's tomb—and Orion was dead."

It's strange to say this and not feel devastated. I'm aware of the devastation, but I'm not devastated. At least not right now.

There's a distance.

"And then I stabbed myself."

I feel my strength when I say that.

This feels like me. That was pretty gutsy. I'm not sure I'd actually do it again. But I've always been able to go for things.

Professor Lauren is sitting silently. I feel how much I never want to leave Lauren's study. Everything else in my life has turned completely upside down. But here with Lauren, I can handle it.

I sit forward on the sofa.

"Lauren, what's happening?" I say tensely. "Why are my memories in Shakespeare's play?"

Lauren is uncannily quiet.

VERONA

Usually she has an answer for everything. "Well, let's remember," she says. "Shakespeare's play was based on a real story. Romeo and Juliet were real people. Later Shakespeare turned their story into a play."

I desperately want Lauren to say more.

To just keep talking. I take another sip of tea, feeling again in two worlds at once. One is hundreds of years old, the other is the present.

I can feel my memories, impressing themselves, overlapping into Lauren's study. Even my body feels different. In my memory, I feel slightly smaller—my body is younger and different. And the way I think about things. It's like I had a different attitude then—a different outlook. I'm more innocent, more religious, but also more aristocratic, somehow more entitled.

It's as if my family, and my family's social status, were more important then. I'm feeling all this—but at the same time, I'm still myself, Zu. It's like being inside another person, exploring who they were and getting to know them, without losing touch of myself. I am two people at once. But both of them are really me.

Different sides of me.

Or different lives of me.

ZU X ORI

"Reincarnation isn't really accepted these days," Lauren breaks the silence. "But a long time ago, it was."

I'm spellbound.

I don't know what Lauren will say next, but I'm hanging on every word. The word *reincarnation* makes things different. Somehow it feels more real.

But also scarier and more important.

"What you described in the ambulance is sometimes called a time crossing," Lauren says. "When you experience two lives at once."

I listen, rapt.

"It's not so uncommon, actually," says Lauren. "Often what we call *deja vu* is a weak form of a time crossing." Lauren is filling my teacup. "In the past, reincarnation was accepted as a part of life. It was part of philosophy and religion. In ancient Egypt, Greece and China—past lives were part of being human."

"What did the Chinese say?" I'm interested.

Ordinarily I'd feel completely weird talking about past lives and reincarnation, while Lauren and I calmly sip from teacups.

But today has not been ordinary.

VERONA

"There's a saying in the *Zhuangzi*," says Lauren. "It's a famous book of Chinese philosophy: *Birth is not a beginning; death is not an end.*"

"So you live on—" I say.

I hold my breath, unconsciously.

"And lived before," says Professor Lauren.

My heart is actually racing. Anytime I'd heard about reincarnation in the past, it was always like: "Well nobody really knows, and nobody will ever know." But now Lauren is saying that people, wise people—a long time ago—actually knew. Or at least thought they did.

Lauren's study seems to open wide. Like the room we're sitting in is bigger than it is.

My hands hold my teacup.

I feel another round of memories could come crashing through, at any time. As if the boundary between the past and the present has been broken.

Now there's nothing stopping the flow.

"Rebirth is a big part of Hinduism too," Lauren goes on. "There are a billion Hindus in the world. And Buddhism. That's how they pick the Dalai Lama."

"What's the point of it?" I ask directly.

ZU X ORI

Lauren seems as interested as I am. "Well, the Greeks thought it was about perfection—and immortality—of the soul. Basically we learn from our mistakes. So over many lifetimes, hopefully, we become more and more—" she reflects a moment, "ourselves."

Wow, I think: *immortality*.

Even the word has weight. I can't remember being so fascinated by anything. I had no idea Lauren was this interesting.

I'm on the edge of the sofa.

"So, why isn't it a thing?"

Lauren laughs. "Well, people stopped remembering their past lives," she says. "Also—it got banned."

Banned!

"By who?"

"The Emperor of Rome," Lauren says casually. What I'm hearing is stranger and stranger. "About fifteen hundred years ago. His name was Justinian. He knew that ideas have power, so he banned any ideas he found threatening. Justinian decreed that anyone believing in reincarnation would be excommunicated from the Church—which, at the time, was the worst thing that could happen to you."

VERONA

“Why was reincarnation threatening?” I can’t stop asking questions now.

“It’s about power, Zu,” says Lauren. “Imagine if people didn’t live in fear of death. If they knew they’d be born again. If they knew they’d come back. That would make them harder to control. Justinian and the Church had all the power—and they wanted to keep it that way.”

“Lauren?” I say, summoning my courage. “Do you think I actually might have been Juliet?”

Lauren considers my question, carefully.

I am hit with a sudden thought. Immediately I stop caring all about philosophy.

I have a bigger question.

“Do you think he knows?” I say.

“Who?” says Lauren.

“Orion.”

I can see Lauren doesn’t get it.

She hasn’t made the jump—that Orion is, or might be, Romeo. She’s only been considering *my* story. “Do you think he knows he’s Romeo?” I say.

I’m struck by a terrifying thought.

ZU X ORI

What if Ori doesn't know? What if he actually doesn't remember? What if I'm the only one? I was the only one in the car accident. What would that be like—to have to remember our past alone?

I imagine how lonely that would be.

I'm three steps ahead of Lauren. I can tell by the expression she wears on her face. For her, this is still just an interesting case study. An example from her books.

For me, it's my life.

"You think Orion is Romeo?"

"Yes," I say.

There's not a doubt in my mind. I don't know where my certainty is coming from. I feel animated, ready to take on the world.

But I want Orion with me.

"Lauren, I need to see him," I say. "Do you know where he lives?"

Lauren sits back, abruptly.

"Zu, you just got out of the hospital," she takes a cautious tone. "You should stay here."

"No way—" I say.

VERONA

I'm feeling my newfound boldness. I stand up, pacing through Lauren's study. "No way. I need to see him. I'm fine anyway—they said so at the hospital." I feel a dizzy wave and catch hold of a nearby chair.

"Lauren, this is important," I steady myself. "Where does he live?"

Lauren hesitates again. Obviously, she knows. So why won't she tell me? "What's with you and Ori anyway?" I say. "I heard you were close."

"We were," Lauren says, honestly.

"So what happened? You've never even mentioned him."

"I gave Orion some advice—" Lauren says, haltingly, "that he didn't like."

I feel there's more to the story.

But that can wait.

"Where does he live?" I ask again.

I feel like I'm pulling teeth, but I don't care. Lauren responds: "We're not really supposed to give out student addresses."

"Lauren—"

"71 Gansevoort Street," she relents.

ZU X ORI

"Ganzi—what?" I ask. I hold out my phone, in front of her face, interrogation-like. "Ganzi—what."

Lauren looks at my phone, awkwardly.

"Share your location with me," she bargains. "In case you pass out in the street."

"Deal," I say.

I tap on my phone.

Then extend my arm again.

"71 Ganse-voort," Lauren deadpans. The location appears on my map.

It's not even that far!

I grab my backpack, rushing out the door.

"Zu wait—"

"I'm fine, Lauren, I promise," I dash down the hallway. I feel Lauren at her door, watching me.

Once I've made up my mind, no one can stop me. I watch the floors tick down in the elevator. It's been five hundred years already.

I don't have another hour to waste.

The floors keep ticking down.

I just pray Ori remembers.

VERONA

Like I do.



Graceful pink clouds float above the ocean.

Beneath a grey blanket, Tai lies curled on the sofa, aboard the Capulet jet. Across from him, Lucrezia stares into the pink horizon, lost deeply in thought. In her lap is her phone. On the screen is a photo of a man in his early 30s, looking earnestly into the camera.

The jet continues in a line.



ZU

I race down to the subway station.

It's only a block from Lauren's apartment. I hear the crackle of a train and burst through the turnstiles in time to catch the C rolling in. I jump on as it accelerates. I'm rushing toward an unknown destiny. I can't sit down, so I stand.

But even standing, I want to run.

Ori, I am coming.



ZU X ORI

Hermes sits at his laptop.

He reads a message on the black screen. Someone named Santiago is typing:

Everything ok?

Hermes replies: *They met*

Then: *Are you here?*

Santiago: *I am*

Hermes turns his head slightly. He smiles.

He shuts his laptop and shoves it into his backpack. Hermes grabs his skateboard, heading down the stairs of his house.



ZU

The C train to 14th Street is only one stop.

It feels like forever. Finally the doors crack open. I dash out and push through the people. Everyone is moving at a snail's pace! Don't they have anywhere to be?

I feel I'm in another gear.

VERONA

My life is urgent.

I come up to the street, black and red lights.

Which way, which way?



Lauren fills her teacup from the kitchen.

She re-enters her study, sitting down alone in the upholstered chair. She takes a slow sip of tea, staring forward, silently.

Lorenzo rests at her feet.



ZU

I spin around, finding my bearings. New York vibrates and pulses with life. I hear a buzz of people in the streets, the dark metallic smell of the night. I proceed up the avenues and in five blocks I am there.

I'm standing outside 71 Gansevoort, a three-story brick building.

I've never wanted to be anywhere more.

ZU X ORI

A light shines from a third story window. I gaze upward,
across the grey cobblestone street.

Are you up there, Ori?

I almost expect him to appear. Cars and pedestrians
pass before me in the night. The world feels harmonious
and full of meaning.

I am in the right place.

At the right time.

Against the backdrop of my pounding heart, I feel a
tear behind my eyes. I stand there, looking at the lighted
window across the street.



EPISODE 4 500 YEARS

ORI

Hermes sits on a stool.

We're in the studio, the night windows open. I pace back and forth in front of Hermes. "Ori, you never told me any of this," he says.

"Didn't I?"

Hermes shakes his head.

I circle the studio slowly, feeling the warm New York night through the windows. "We were living in the desert," I

ZU X ORI

continue my story, "just outside L.A. My mom was sculpting there."

Hermes looks on.

He knows this part.

"I loved the desert," I say, remembering aloud. "The sun and heat, the cool, clear nights, that incredible starlight."

I eye Hermes.

"I'm not a New Yorker, like you."

"Not yet," he winks.

"I used to go into the hills," I continue. "It was the year my sister died. It was a way to be alone."

Hermes eyes me.

"One day I climbed up a ridge. I could see miles and miles into the desert. It was almost sunset. There was the biggest red sun—just sitting on the horizon," I remember. "I stood there, staring into the sun. And I knew: something was coming. Something amazing was going to happen."

I keep pacing before Hermes.

"You know what I mean?" I say. "When you just know something *in your bones*."

Hermes is unusually quiet.

VERONA

"We moved within a year," I look at him. "My parents wanted a change. We came here."

I turn toward the open windows.

"That's why last year felt so empty," I explain. "When I made the white dress, I felt something was *about to happen*. But then it didn't."

Hermes leans forward on the stool.

"But now it has," he says.



ZU

I cross the cobblestone street. Outside the low brick building, I read the lettering beside the door:

71 Gansevoort

Oh, this is happening!

How many years from Verona to now? And here we are again. For the first time, I immediately melt into a bundle of nerves.

I can't do it.

I make a left, right before the doorway.

ZU X ORI

Rapidly, I retreat to the nearest streetcorner. I don't know what I'm doing—only that I'm not ready. I feel powerless. What am I going to say?

What if it's not the same?

I stand on the sidewalk, outside a restaurant that says Buddy's on a sign above the awning. I stand there at the corner, across the street from the High Line—where this morning I kissed Orion.

The bravest thing I've done.

And now I'm just afraid.

Of what?

Maybe the biggest letdown in history? What if he doesn't feel the way I feel?

Or has a girlfriend?

It's possible!

But mostly, mostly—

I'm afraid he won't remember. That he won't ever remember. That I'll have these memories to myself. And there will be nothing I can do.

Could I handle that?

A lifetime of memories alone.

VERONA

The corner restaurant, Buddy's, is packed and lively. I look through the windows at the diners at the crowded tables, wondering if they've ever felt like me. On the verge of something incredible.

And scared.

If they had moments that could change their lives.

And what they chose.



ORI

"Lauren only made it worse," I continue.

Hermes looks up.

"She kept getting involved," I complain. "Like she could fix everything. As if she couldn't stand seeing me unhappy! She nearly convinced me to transfer. Remember her idea? The art school in Italy? Like that would make everything better."

"She was trying to help."

"I didn't need her help," I am adamant. "And I didn't want to go anywhere."

Hermes looks at me.

ZU X ORI

"I'm right where I belong," I say.

I gaze toward the window again.



ZU

I gather my nerve.

My legs are like dead weights. They don't agree with my decision. But I force them ahead, one after another, toward the door of the building.

It's the last place I want to go now.

I grab for the door handle—just as it swings sharply outward, almost hitting me in the face. I step quickly to the side, as a man carrying a giant potted fern pushes through the door.

I step further back.

I can't even see around him.

"Oops," he says politely.

I retreat up Gansevoort Street again. I stand a few doors down, biting my lip.

Maybe it wasn't meant to be?

Or time to try again.

VERONA

I draw slowly toward 71 Gansevoort, my legs feeling lighter now. I'm amused at myself, for running away from the potted plant man. I head directly for the entrance, as the door opens again.

Three girls emerge, stylishly dressed. They chat eagerly among themselves.

I divert my path, dodging the girls. I pass the entrance again and keep walking.

Until I'm back in front of Buddy's.

Okay.

This is getting ridiculous.

Why did I do that? Did I think they were Ori's friends or something? Or coming from his place?

Come on, Zu.

I gaze through the wide windows of Buddy's again, where the evening diners sit at their tables. It's now or never, I tell myself.

Now.

Or never.

I summon something inside me. I walk determinedly toward the door of 71 Gansevoort.

One last time.

ZU X ORI

A deliveryman enters the building.

I catch the door behind him. I start up the stairwell. I'm no longer thinking, only moving. I notice the clean grey-painted walls and the narrow, concrete stairs. I'm coming up on the second floor, where there are four doors to choose from.

My phone buzzes in my pocket.

I read the message.

It's Lauren:

Third floor

I continue going up the stairs. On the third floor, there are another four doors.

It's Lauren again:

On the right

I walk to the first door, I knock on it.

I hear footsteps coming.

Ori, I'm here.

The door opens. I see someone I don't recognize.

"Hi—" I say surprised.

VERONA

A boy in a red t-shirt looks at me. He is staring straight at me. He's looking at me like he *knows me*. But I've never seen him before.

He smiles easily.

"Can I help you?"

"I—I—I'm," I don't know what to say.

"Yes?"

"I'm looking for Ori," I manage.

He keeps smiling his warm smile. Again, like he's expecting me. His keen eyes observe me, caringly.

"Come on in—" he says. "I'm Hermes."

That's a funny name.

Almost like a Hong Kong name.

I step inside. My eyes devour the room at once. Beyond a normal-looking living room is a large studio space, strewn with dresses and other cloth. Everywhere are scraps of fabric, a sewing machine, paper patterns and odd-looking tools. It's an absolute, wonderful mess. My eyes wander the room, touching every object.

Hermes is standing beside me.

I'm thinking what to say.

ZU X ORI

"He's on the roof," Hermes says.

My heart skips a beat.

Or two.

Toward the back of the studio, a tall window lies halfway open. It's clear that's where I'm to go. I start forward, passing the white dress that I vaguely recognize from last night's stream.

It's all like a dream.

That I'm now part of.

I walk toward the back of the room. Leaning through the open window, I look outward, then step onto the fire escape.



Three stories down is the ground.

I place my hand along the iron railing of the fire escape. Below and beyond me are the busy lights and streets of New York City.

But there's no one here.

I step along the grated, metal walkway, looking down at the ground below my feet. Ahead of me is another flight of stairs, leading up.

VERONA

In the moonlit darkness, I see a figure atop the stairs. I stop where I am, as if any movement would frighten them away.

Is that Orion?

My arms fall limp, my eyes turned up.

I can see him now, his face in the shadows. I observe him closely. How easily he stands, leaning slightly yet straight, his arms outstretched on the fire escape railing above me.

He's looking out over the city.

He doesn't see me.

The way he gazes outward, like the world is his kingdom! Oh dignity, composure—and thought! He appears to me as a prince, an artist, and a knight.

I fix this impression in my heart.

And now—Orion lowers his head and gazes straight at me. We are only shapes, silhouettes among the shadows, yet somehow our gazes meet and lock. The moonlight is glazing over the empty street below.

I stop where I'm standing.

Is it really you?

ZU X ORI

The boy from my memories? Is this you—who I died for,
so long ago?

He rises up, standing taller.

“Orion—” I speak.

He doesn’t move.

My shoes are rooted. Neither of us are able to move. I
want to scream out. But I can’t make a sound. Or move a
bone of my body.

He says, in wonder:

“Is it you?”

My heart breaks by his voice.

“It’s me—” I cry out.

Then I say.

“It’s Zu.”

Orion barely moves, but I feel him staggering. I don’t
know what to do or say next.

So I stay silent.



ORI

What?!

VERONA

I stare downward, my hands gripped tightly upon the iron railing. Like my life depends on it. I feel a shock through my entire body.

Of recognition, and familiarity.

The girl is standing below me, on the stairs. Is it her from this morning?

Fool!

Of course it is!

But how? What is she doing here?

I watch her gazing up at me. The morning at Jack's comes racing back. Through the moonlight shadows, I see her green shirt and purple hair falling gently on her shoulders, her head raised up.

She takes a step on the stairs.

If she takes one more, I will burst.

"No—" I warn.

She waits.

I don't know why, but I am terrified. I have an awful feeling inside me. I hold out my palm.

"Don't come closer," I tell her.

"Why not?" she asks, perplexed.

ZU X ORI

I haven't heard a dozen words she's spoken, but I know her voice. The girl takes another two steps anyway, disregarding me.

Her gaze is shining.

Why am I hesitating?

I can't name what I'm feeling. It has a hold over me I can't explain. Carefully I release my grip on the railing, gazing down.

"I'm afraid," I say.

"Of what?"

I have no idea. This morning I followed her through the streets. But now? "A memory—" I say. Below, she takes one step closer.

"Is it painful?" she asks.

I feel an ache in my stomach.

"Yes."

"What is the memory?" she asks, gently.

A part of me knows.

It's the part of me that knows my secret. But there's another part that doesn't want to know. That is terrified to know. The girl in green is climbing the stairs. She moves nimbly, she is halfway toward me.

VERONA

Now I see her face in the moonlight.

Oh, she is beautiful.

Her eyes are searching mine. She climbs to the top of the fire escape, where I am standing. Then says, meaningfully, "Do you remember me?"

I step back from the stairs.

"From this morning," I say.

The girl frowns lightly, brushing hair from her face. I feel I've said something wrong. "From the coffee shop, right?" I make it even worse.

"That's all?" she replies.

What does she want me to say?

Somehow, I know I should know. *But I don't know!* I step backward clumsily, nearly tripping over my feet. This is so unlike me.

What am I afraid of?

I'm enchanted with her.

But all I want is to escape.

"So you don't remember?" she asks again.

What is she actually asking me? But already, I know. This is about last year. And whatever was supposed to happen.

ZU X ORI

This is about my memories, the ones I can't unlock. The ones I can't remember.

But how can she know?

I fumble my words. "I don't—"

"No," she says, sadly, "you don't."

Her gaze is pained.

I am backing to the edge of the fire escape. The girl in the green shirt follows. "Orion," she says. How intimately she says my name!

As if she's always known me.

My back is pressed against the railing. The girl in the green shirt steps toward me.

"Something happened," I hear her say, "after we met this morning. You may not believe me—I'm not even sure I believe myself." Our eyes are locked once again, just like this morning. "But I know you."

Something is happening.

"I know who you are," she says.

What does she mean?

Our gaze is going deeper. I am beginning to feel what I can't remember. I feel how much I want to remember. And how much I don't.

VERONA

How terrified I am.

Of this memory.

Something is changing about the night. The rooftop fire escape and the buildings of the city, even the air itself, are beginning to change.

They are turning transparent.

“Can you remember?” the girl is urging me. “Can you try to remember?”

“Zu—” my voice feels strange.

The girl nearly dissolves at her name. She exhales, moving closer to me, until we are almost touching. She raises her hand toward my heart.

I don't move.

I've given in to this mystery.

She says, “I need you to remember.”

“How?” I say.

I am staring into her eyes.

Something inside me is starting to happen. I hear a sound like butterfly's wings. Our surroundings are continuing to change. Across the street, the brownstone buildings have nearly disappeared.

ZU X ORI

Zu's hand is over my heart.

She whispers:

"My love, my life, my friend—"

Something shatters inside me.

I've heard these words before. But where? A boundary has been broken. The fire escape is rapidly fading away. In its place is a stone balcony with climbing roses and alabaster columns. We're in both places at once. I see a young girl dressed in white, standing before me. She speaks to me, passionately:

"I must hear from thee every day in the hour,

For in a minute there are many days."

We're in two places at once. On my New York rooftop, Zu holds my heart. On the stone balcony, the girl in the white dress goes on:

"By this count I shall be much in years

VERONA

Before I behold my Romeo again."

Romeo!

That's my name.

My name is Romeo.

The girl in white leans on the balcony, her bare feet brushing the terra cotta tile. I reach for her, twisting my hands in her hair. Beyond us lies the new, green night. The girl looks different.

But she's the same person.

The same as Zu.

I am a boy. I am younger, but remind me of myself. I say, confidently:

"I'll miss no chance to send you my love."

I'm in love—as in love as any human being, ever. I'm captured by the girl in the white dress, my eyes brilliant.

She blossoms:

"Do you think we'll meet again?"

ZU X ORI

I reply, boldly:

"I have no doubt. This will give us stories to tell each other, in times to come."

I say:

"Farewell, Juliet."

Juliet!

The girl's name is Juliet.

How the sound wrenches my heart!

Oh, everything is coming back.

On the fire escape, Zu holds my heart. Neither of us move, as if frozen in time. I've surrendered to whatever is happening. On the stone balcony, the girl in the white dress inches toward me.

She kisses my lips.

And I hear the butterfly's wings.

The delicate sound explodes inside me. New York and the fire escape have completely disappeared. The stone

VERONA

balcony has disappeared. I am moving rapidly and deeply inside myself, memories are flashing across my mind. I am disintegrating into memories. I am nothing but memories. Time has slowed to a stop. I am surrounded by images and memories. The girl in the white dress remains, her lips brushing mine—and then she also disappears.

Now I see horses.

I am riding on a white charger. Beside me, Juliet sits astride a spotted stallion.

We are emerging from a forest, riding hard, the countryside flattening in front of us. Our horses thunder and pound the ground.

We splash in a stream, down rows of a vineyard. I feel the horse's hooves beneath me, as the sunshine arcs in the sky. Juliet wears a long green dress, white trim embroidered on the breast. I have taught her to ride. It's the only way we can be together. We are happy and excited, the vineyard rows disappearing beneath us as our horses leave the earth behind.

This is love. This is life.

Now the scene is changing.

In the garden, it's late afternoon and the gold light is falling over the flowers. Juliet is smelling them, as usual. My

ZU X ORI

shirt is torn, we mend it together. Juliet is teaching me to sew. I look in her brown eyes, watching her thread and needle, looping around and around.

But I learn too slow.

She teases me, as I stare into her eyes. Neither of us knows what to do.

We are young.

Now someone is coming. We hear their voices. I dash away through the garden.

A dozen more images arrive in my mind. An elegant portico in the sun. I am well dressed and young, my father, my mother, my friends—and this girl—Juliet, love of my life. I have never known such joy and happiness. Sunny, sunny images, the sun and the golden land, a love of clothing and cats. The images flood my memory, one after another, flashes and insights, like a trove of photos forgotten forever and only found again. The memories are arriving, a dozen a second, overwhelming my ability to process what is happening.

I am sitting in a field with Juliet.

Around us is the green grass, the forest further away. We are facing each other.

“And you promise?” she says, seriously.

VERONA

"I'll never lose you."

I reach out, taking her hand. In that moment, a green grasshopper lights upon her finger.

We watch its eyes together.

"It's an omen," I say.

She blushes.

"If you lose me, you'll find me," she smiles.

"I'll find you," I say.

The green grasshopper flies away.

We walk across the field, toward our horses. The green grasshoppers are flying across the field, sheltered by the gold light of the sun.

I promise, I promise.

I promise.



The images swirl once again.

Now I am carrying a torch. The night is misty and damp, I have dirt on my hands and blood on my shirt. I am descending into a tomb.

No.

ZU X ORI

Not this.

This is the memory.

The one I was afraid of. The memory I never want to remember. I want to forget. I want to run.

But I keep descending down.

Into the tomb.

I cannot stop myself.

Horror grabs hold of my heart.

Noooo—

Anything, but this!

Anything.

But.

This.



Juliet lies in the tomb.

Her hands and face are pale as death. Every fiber of my being cries out for death. I stand over her body, peacefully white and surrounded by cold. I feel nothing, except this grief.

No wonder I wanted to forget.

VERONA

No wonder I wanted to escape! In my hand is a green bottle, filled with death.

I drink it down:

Oh, thy drugs!

I lie dead, beside Juliet.



But that isn't the end. The memories aren't over.

I am traveling backward in time. I am in a dusty sun-covered square, with my quarrelsome friend. He says: "Tybalt, you rat-catcher."

"Gentle Mercutio," I hold him back.

Now blood covers my hands and shirt. Mercutio is slain! What treachery, what villainy is this?

I am enraged.

Madness overtakes me. I draw my sword, my friends attempt to restrain me. But I break free, attacking Tybalt, Mercutio's killer.

We break into a frenzy of blows.

Tybalt retreats, barely able to defend himself. Finally my sword strikes home! Tybalt staggers and slumps, his blood in the streets.

ZU X ORI

Yes, he is Juliet's brother.

I am his killer. I flee.

From here on is despair. From Tybalt's death, there is no turning back.

From now on is tragedy.

But one last glimpse of ecstasy.

I see stars on a warm, black night. I feel Verona, my hometown, all around me. I know its alleyways and buildings by heart. I am walking together with my friends at night.

We tease each other, carefree.

We arrive at the Capulet mansion. The fires burn and all the guests are dancing. Juliet is dressed in fine purple silk. I am starstruck. We exchange partners and then eagerly return to each other. Her parents are watching. They don't approve of me, a Montague, but tonight there is nothing they can do. I absorb Juliet's every detail, the way she moves, the braids of her hair, the touch of her finger, the flesh of her shoulder.

We draw apart from the crowd.

In the commotion of the evening, no one notices us.

VERONA

In this moment, my life changed course. Juliet and I pull aside, along a narrow passageway. We have no time to waste.

We have only this moment.

I draw Juliet's lips to mine. Time disappears forever, into this eternal kiss—re-appearing on the rooftops of New York City.

In front of me, Zu's lips part from mine.

She is smiling.



ZU

I awaken late in the night.

My first thought is: I'm back at home, stretched out under my duvet blanket. But something about the room smells different. I roll on my side and see Orion sleeping across the bed. The moonlight is falling on his face.

So it wasn't a dream!

I rest my eyes on Orion, letting his presence sink in. He looks so blissful sleeping.

Like a thousand year sleep.

ZU X ORI

I don't dare wake him.

I glance around in the grey darkness. The large room feels both foreign and comfortable. I slip over to Ori's workspace, where scraps of fabric and a few photos are pinned on a cork board.

I quietly click on a small desk lamp.

I lean closer, examining the photos.

There's one of a younger Ori with his family, another of Ori standing in a desert background, and a few photos of the desert itself. I spot something else, partially hidden beneath some paper.

It's a driver's license.

I can't resist.

I slide it carefully from under the paper. In the photo, Orion is looking at me, smiling casually. I read the name on the card.

"Orion Moore," I say silently.

As if I'm learning a secret.

I replace the license where it was.

On my phone, I see a message from Lauren:

Are you okay?

VERONA

I reply:

Yes

I found him



I step backward, then turn around slowly, as if someone's presence is behind me. In the middle of the room is the white dress.

It stands like a ghostly figure.

I'm struck seeing it. I cross the room, stopping a bit before it. I recognize it from my memory of the tomb. I feel I'm looking at myself in the mirror.

It's not exactly the same.

But it's close.

We stand there, the white dress and I, facing each other. Like long lost friends, or twins. In the moonlight, I contemplate Ori's creation.

What he must have imagined!

To make this.

A sudden banging jolts my reverie. At once, the banging is all through the studio. My head spins around, looking for the noise.

ZU X ORI

I can't find the source of the sound.

But it's so loud!

It comes in loud explosions of five:

Bam, bam, bam, bam, bam!

Then silence. Then again.

Bam, bam, bam, bam, bam!

I don't know whether to hide or cry. Now I realize it's coming from the door to the apartment. Someone is knocking—no, pounding—on the door. Again, louder: *Bam, bam, bam, bam, bam!* I hurry and approach the door. Whoever is outside does not feel nice.

But I don't have a choice.

The banging won't stop until I open the door.

I make my way slowly toward it. My bare feet cross a patch of moonlight on the floor.

Now the entire room is shaking:

Bam, bam, bam, bam, bam!

The banging is inches away. I place my fingertips on the cold brass handle. I summon my courage, then open the door. The banging stops.

Oh. *What?*

VERONA

There's no one there.

But that's not what's strange.

On the other side of the door, *there's not even a hallway*. I'm standing in the doorway of Ori's studio. But on the other side is a stone courtyard in the moonlight.

No, I look again.

It's not a courtyard, it's the square of an old city.

I smell jasmine, moss and old cobblestones in the warm, night air. The rich scents waft through the doorway. I see a tall stone statue and a fountain. Now I recognize this place. From my memories.

This is Verona.

I contemplate if I should step through. That feels completely reckless, and more than a little dangerous. I could just close the door, right?

But I can't turn back.

Besides, I'm way too curious.

Carefully, I extend my bare foot forward. My toes touch the cool cobblestones of the square. It's the Piazza delle Erbe, Verona's main square. I know it well.

My first sensation is: *I'm home*.

ZU X ORI

It's a wave of relief, a feeling of safety. Like I *belong* here. I've missed it so *much*—without even knowing it. I move forward, more relieved with every step. I make my way toward the fountain. I remember: I used to play here with my friends. I remember us splashing in the water and laughing.

I'm standing by the fountain.

Here in the Verona moonlight, I am Juliet Capulet again. I am no longer Agnes Zhu. She has not even been born. New York doesn't yet exist. I look down at my arm. There's no bandage now. I'm wearing a plain white dress, with short lace sleeves.

And I'm not alone.

Standing at the end of the square, in front of a three-story palazzo, is a gang of dark figures. Their faces are shrouded. One of them, wearing a heavy cloak and hood, stands in front of the others. In the background are twenty or thirty more, men and women.

I can only see their shapes.

The leader raises his left arm, slowly, until his gloved finger points at me.

Something tells me to turn around.

VERONA

But before I've taken a step, a second group of figures appears behind me. I'm trapped in the square between them.

And I know who they are.

They're Capulets.

I've left them. Now they want me back.

The two groups are surrounding me. I retreat in one direction, only to reverse in the other. Soon I'm trapped against the fountain. The dark figures encircle me. They smell like cold, wet steel. I hear the shuffling of their feet, amid the splash of the fountain. I still can't see their faces. But they're almost upon me.

I have nowhere to go.

From behind, two of the figures grab my arms, one on each side. A shock of terror, like electricity, crosses my skin. Their grasp is bony and hard.

The leader, in the heavy cloak, strides forward coldly, reaching out his gloved hand. But before he can grab me, a bluish white light ruptures the sky.

Everyone stops where they are.

ZU X ORI

The bony hands release their grasp. Now even the fountain is silent. The heads of the dark figures—and my own—all gaze skyward in awe.

This light cannot be ignored.

The bluish white light is descending into the square, over every head and building and stone. The Verona night sky is filled with light.



I wake up with a rush.

I'm on the couch, in Orion's bedroom. Daylight is wafting in through the curtains. There's no fountain, no blue white light in the sky.

No one is trying to grab me.

Across the room Orion lies asleep, the sunlight catching his wavy hair.

I inch over toward the bed, crawling onto the bedcovers, beside Orion. I want to know this is real and not another dream. I peer over his shoulder, carefully watching the rise of his breathing. Outside the window, a brown starling flutters on the fire escape.

Orion blinks open his eyes.

VERONA

Again we're caught.

He's looking at me, a combination of searching and uncertain. But also with absolute trust. I don't think I've ever felt so trusted. By anyone.

It touches me, deeply.

"You've been sleeping," I say gently. "I think it's normal after—" I'm unsure what to say next, "remembering. I was out a long time too." I leave out being in the hospital, which feels complicated.

Orion looks as if I might vanish.

"Oh," he says, vaguely.

He rests himself on his elbows, his t-shirt pulling at his shoulders. At the hospital, it wasn't until I saw the ambulance that everything came back. I wonder if Orion is going through something similar.

"What—" he tries to speak.

"It's called a time crossing," I say. "It's two lives at once. That's what Lauren says."

"Lauren?"

Orion shuts his eyes, like he's remembering.

ZU X ORI

Then he says, "I thought you were dead." I don't know what he means. "In the tomb—" he says painfully. "I thought you were *dead*."

"I was *sleeping*," I say achingly.

Five hundred years of grief flood through me. "It was a *sleeping potion*," I say. "You were supposed to *wake* me!"

"*Sleeping*?" says Orion.

His gaze is devastated, trembling. He presses his palms on his forehead. My heart is bottoming out, into a dark, endless pit. How do you survive what happened to us? How do you survive the ultimate tragedy?

When death is not the end, there's only one choice.

You have to feel it.

Every last bit.

I'm about to lose it, completely. I take Orion's head, holding him between my hands. I hold him there with everything I have.

It's the simplest, most honest thing I can do.

There's nothing to not understand.

I feel Orion melting, breathing deeply. He looks up toward me sideways. Again that feeling of total trust that burns right through me. How do I express what I'm feeling?

VERONA

Infinite gratitude? Infinite thanks? My love of loves—who I thought I had lost forever—is with me at my side. This is the greatest gift in the world.

“Thank you, thank you,” I whisper.

I’m not sure who I’m thanking.

It doesn’t matter. Ori clutches at me intently. I feel his warmth and smell his hair. He touches my arm, where I have the bandage.

“What happened to you?” he asks.

“I was hit by a car.”

“What?”

“Not me—my taxi,” I explain. “That’s how I remembered. The accident triggered it. It was after kissing you,” I add, smiling without embarrassment.

“You were hit by a car?” Orion repeats, like that’s the most incredible part of the story. He looks worried, as if maybe I might just die again.

“Really, I’m fine,” I say.

I’m not sure he believes me.

“Were you with me?” he asks. “Last night—with everything that happened.”

My eyes look him over.

"Yeah," I say.

I watch the brown starling, fluttering on the fire escape. Everything feels raw in this moment. I feel I'm at the beginning of a completely new life. But it's also tied—or bound up—with the past.

For better or for worse.

"What is it?" Ori asks, sensing me.

He knows me too well.

"I had a dream," I answer him. I don't really want to talk about it, especially now. But I can't keep it a secret. Not from Orion. "I was back in Verona. There was an angry mob," I tell him, as I remember it. "They were angry I'd left them. They wanted me back."

"Who were they?"

"My family."

Ori just stares at me, digesting my words.

"The Capulets," I say.

I try to sound calm, but I'm still unnerved. I remember how real the palazzo felt, the stones and the fountain. I consider telling Orion about the ending of the dream. About the mysterious blue light in the sky. But I decide against it. I don't even know what it means.

VERONA

If anything.

"It was just a dream," I shrug.

I gaze around the room. On Ori's nightstand is a sitting Buddha and a couple candles.

My phone is ringing.

Oh, not again.

On the screen, I see Lauren's face. Sorry Lauren, not now—I can't. I swipe decline.

"Was that—" Ori looks over.

Before I can answer, I see a message from Kimmo: "Are you coming today?" What is she talking about?

Oh!

The rehearsal. For The Lights.

With Landon.

It feels like ancient history to me. I'm already late and I consider blowing it off. But I can't. And besides, I actually want to be there.

"It's my friend, Kimmo," I tell Orion.

I wonder if he knows her. She knew *him*. So many questions swirl in my head. How did Orion and I end up at the same school?

ZU X ORI

And why didn't he stay?

"We're rehearsing a sketch for The Lights," I say.

"Really?" Ori sounds interested.

I realize Orion doesn't know anything about my actual life. Or I about his.

I'm quickly gathering up my things.

In my haste, I drop my backpack, spilling my pencil and tablet on the floor.

Orion casually picks up the tablet. On the screen is my drawing of the boy from my imagination. The one from the ferry on Victoria Harbour.

Both of us are awestruck.

"This *looks* like me," Ori says.

We're both speechless. It's just a rough sketch, but there's an uncanny likeness. His hair has a similar quality, and I've captured something of his cheekbone. And the way his eyes gaze forward.

Like he's looking into the future.

But more than anything, it's that *I feel him* in my drawing.

I take a long, deep breath. This is all so surreal. "Why don't you come with me?" I say.

VERONA

It's a brilliant idea.

"To school?" Ori answers. "No."

"Why not?"

I look at him.

He doesn't answer.

"Okay," I decide. "I'll come back."

Orion's eyes are piercing, as if we never had a day apart. As if Verona was only yesterday. He removes the red yarn bracelet from his arm.

He slides it down my wrist.

"So you don't forget me," he smiles.

My heart is open.

"No more accidents?" he says.

I smile.

"I promise."



EPISODE 5 **A CAPULET SECRET**

ZU

I'm on the train again.

I've already missed yesterday's rehearsal—and now I'm late today. But somehow, I'm not stressed. The time crossing has changed me. Everything else is like a blur in the background.

I lean against the hard subway seat, listening to the clickity-clack of the subway rails.

I glance at the red yarn on my wrist.

A CAPULET SECRET

The fibers of the bracelet itch at my skin. In the best way possible. It's a concrete bond to Orion—in all that's happening. Which is what I need. I rub the red strands of yarn softly between my fingers. It brings my connection with Ori right back to me.

Up my arm is the hospital IV bandage.

I tear it off and examine the skin. There's just a dull red spot. Miraculously, I don't have any other wounds on my body.

As if it never happened.

I check a message from Lauren. It's from last night, but it might as well be last year.

Are you okay?

I reply:

Yes

I found him



Wide eyed, I glance around the subway car. I feel I'm seeing everything for the first time. Or with new eyes.

I watch a middle-aged woman with glasses, reading on a device. A man in a grey business suit sits beside her, a

ZU X ORI

leather case on his lap. In the aisle are two teenagers on their phones, earbuds in.

I'm surprisingly fascinated. I am seeing these people from an entirely new angle.

Who were they in their last life?

They must have been someone. If I had a past life, that means everyone had a past life. Everyone.

As in *everyone*.

Everyone comes back.

It wouldn't make any sense, if only Orion and I reincarnated. Isn't that what Lauren said? In the past, people *knew* they reincarnated.

My mind short-circuits, spontaneously blown. I think to myself: *it's like everyone is walking around with amnesia. About their past.*

I was too—until yesterday. My whole idea of life is being flipped on its head. I'm imagining an entire planet of people—*eight billion of us*—walking around with amnesia about who we used to be.

Who we *are*.

Woah.

A CAPULET SECRET

I'm staring at the man in the business suit. Who were you in your last life? Were you a man or a woman? When did you live? In what country?

Were you white or black or Asian?

What was your life like? Did you have a family and children? Did you grow old?

Or was your life cut short?

Like mine.

I'm noticing his every detail. The way he holds his briefcase tight, his slightly slumped posture, the way his head leans to one side.

Were you loved? I wonder.

Like I was?

I am overcome with quiet empathy. I don't know the businessman sitting across from me. But I can feel the human parts of him. He's had triumphs and tragedies. Just like I have. He's known hopes and disappointment, love and loneliness.

Just like I have.

In so many ways, he's like me.

I glance from the businessman to the two teenagers, then the middle-aged woman and the other passengers

ZU X ORI

aboard the train. I am thinking of everyone in New York City and all their forgotten pasts.

Why doesn't anyone remember?

I ask myself: *Is this some kind of conspiracy?* Is it only Orion and myself? Only us, awakened in the world.

Or are there others?

My thoughts race ahead of me.

I can't keep up. There's a universe of questions I've never even considered. What happened to my family from the past? Where are they now? What happened to my father and mother and brother?

I feel so grateful for Orion. For second chances.

For memory.

What if everyone on this train could feel what I am feeling now? If they all remembered their pasts?

That would change their lives.

"Can I help you?" the businessman says to me.

He's caught me staring.

"Oh, sorry—" I say, embarrassed.

A CAPULET SECRET

I can't even imagine explaining. Just be thankful, I tell myself. Just be thankful. I twist my fingers around the red yarn on my wrist.

I am thankful.



Above ground, I head for the theater. The final rehearsals for The Lights are at a large performing arts center next to Washington Square Park. It's where The Lights will take place.

I walk a few blocks, then enter the theater.

Immediately my skin tingles.

I've always had a feeling of reverence for the theater. It's especially easy in this beautiful one, with its black railings and brilliant red seats.

I start toward the stage.

I'm actually only a few minutes late.

A group of students are on stage, with Landon and Kimmo in the center. There are plastic palm trees on rollers on both sides of them, representing a passageway in the Capulet mansion.

My steps slow, slightly.

ZU X ORI

The time crossing has changed everything. I can see how this crude scene is modeled on what I actually remember. But it's so far from reality.

The difference is shocking.

It's just a caricature.

I hear Landon, speaking his lines to Kimmo. She's standing in for me, I guess.

He still isn't doing it right. Kimmo stands there, like a deer caught in the headlights.

"If I profane with my unworhiest hand

This holy shrine, the gentle fine is this:

My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand

To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss."

Landon edges toward Kimmo, who backs away. It's just as bad as the first time. If not worse.

I break into laughter, loudly.

Unexpectedly.

A CAPULET SECRET

Landon and Kimmo pivot toward me. I walk casually onto the stage. Landon takes two steps toward me, looking annoyed.

"Nice of you to show up," he says.

"Sorry I'm late," I greet them.

Kimmo stares at me. "Where have you been?" she breaks away from Landon and the plastic palms. I alter my direction slightly, avoiding both Landon and Kimmo—and her question. I move to the edge of the stage, where I drop my backpack.

Kimmo comes over to me.

"I met someone," I smile quickly.

"*Tell me—*" Kimmo looks at me, excitedly. I'm about to burst at the seams. I want to tell Kimmo everything. But I restrain myself.

What's happened is too special.

I need to guard this, carefully. Also, I have no idea where to start.

I keep it simple.

"I met Orion," I tell her.

"*What—*" she says. "Ori from Trinity?"

"Yes."

ZU X ORI

"How?"

"We-bumped into each other."

"And?" Kimmo says, eagerly.

I breathe in deeply, smiling secretly. I wonder how much to share with Kimmo. I know I can tell her anything, but instead, I just look her deeply in the eyes. She picks up on my wordless gaze.

"Ohh," she says.

She doesn't know what's happened.

But she understands. We share a moment, as I stare vulnerably into Kimmo's eyes.

"Hey Zu—" Landon calls out. "Do you feel like joining me today?"

I turn around, relieved.

As much as I love Kimmo, I'm not really ready to talk about this. I shoot her another glance that says: *I'll tell you later.*

We both walk over to Landon.

I take over for Kimmo, standing opposite Landon between the plastic palm trees.

I feel surprisingly calm.

A CAPULET SECRET

Landon focuses, then begins again:

"If I profane with my unworhiest hand

This holy shrine—"

"Stop," I say.

I can't let him go on.

"What do you mean?" Landon looks incredulous. "I just started—"

"You're making it all about yourself," I interrupt him again. I've finally figured out his problem. It's so obvious, now that I have something to compare it with. My actual memories. "It's not about you." I can see Kimmo smiling at me, behind Landon.

"It is about me," Landon says.

"No, it's about *me*," I reply.

Hearing my words makes me shiver. I'm not used to hearing myself speak this way. So boldly.

I step toward Landon.

"Look, Landon—" I explain. I close my eyes a second, gathering my thoughts. "This is about how Romeo is

ZU X ORI

feeling. Of course. But what he's feeling is *about Juliet*. So I need to feel that in your lines."

Landon listens, grudgingly.

"Do you want to try again?" I ask.

Landon inhales, then backs up slowly. He is staring at me, cautiously.

He begins:

"If I profane with my unworhiest hand

This holy shrine—"

It's better.

"—the gentle fine is this:

My lips—"

It's getting worse, again.

"Look into my eyes," I direct Landon. "Not *at* my eyes, into my eyes."

Landon raises his chin, doing what I say.

A CAPULET SECRET

*"Two blushing pilgrims, ready stand
To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss."*

Landon is looking in my eyes now. This is actually improving.

There is a brief silence—

Oh! I realize it's my turn.

I say:

*"Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much,
Which mannerly devotion shows in this;
For saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch,
And palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss."*

The words roll off my tongue. Landon's jaw drops, as he listens. I see Kimmo staring at me, as well.

Landon snaps back into character:

"Have not saints lips, and holy palmers too?"

ZU X ORI

I cringe.

It's not that Landon is especially bad. But when you've heard these words *for real*, hearing anyone else say them falls painfully short.

"Maybe—" I suggest, "just try being yourself."

"This *is* me."

I chortle.

"What's so funny?" Landon demands.

"Well, you're not Romeo," I say.

I've made Landon defensive, borderline furious. "I don't see you in *The Lights*," he snaps back.

Grrrr.

This hits a sore spot. He has a point.

My lips purse.

"Do it again," I say to Landon.

Landon prepares himself, then says:

"Have not saints lips, and holy palmers too?"

It's better, somehow.

A CAPULET SECRET

I decide to invest myself. I step toward Landon. I place my hands gently on his shoulders, adjusting his posture. "Just try—to be more natural," I say. Landon exhales. I can feel him loosening up.

I say:

"Ay, pilgrim, lips that they must use in prayer."

I step in a slow circle, around Landon, observing his posture. Landon's head turns, following me. He says:

"O, then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do;

They pray, grant thou, lest faith turn to despair."

I answer:

"Saints do not move, though grant for prayers' sake."

I've returned full circle, facing Landon. He looks into my eyes. There is actually real chemistry now.

ZU X ORI

Landon draws near, closing the space between us. I smell a mild fragrance, something spice-like. Landon says:

"Then move not, while my prayer's effect I take.

Thus from my lips—"

Landon's face is inches from mine.

"That's enough—" I say.

I place my palm against Landon's shirt, pushing him gently backward. Landon doesn't say anything.

I realize the theater has grown quiet.

Kimmo and the other kids are all watching. Landon also is looking at me in a different way.

"Thanks," he says.

I just nod.

Lowering my eyes.

"Can we do it again tomorrow?" Landon asks.

"Sure."

I begin walking toward my backpack. Kimmo is observing me. When I reach her, she says, "Zu, that was really special."

A CAPULET SECRET

I smile, thinly.

Inside I am processing what happened. It's the most I've ever enjoyed myself on stage.

"How did you know the lines?"

"Oh—" I say, covering. "From the other day, I guess."

The group begins breaking up. I can tell Kimmo wants to remain behind to talk to me. But she has a class to get to. "I'll find you later," she promises me. The others head off quickly as well.

I have a free period, so I don't hurry.

"No problem," I call after them, joking. "I'll just clean up here, by myself." I feel a warm glow in my heart. What just happened has lit a fire in me.

It feels so good.



I roll the plastic palms backstage.

Then I return, collecting the remaining props. As I do this, I gaze out into the empty theater, feeling the stories that are brought to life here.

It gives me a sudden chill.

Like I belong here.

ZU X ORI

I pause at the edge of the stage, savoring this. Then I grab my backpack, heading up the aisle between the long rows of red seats. I'm halfway to the exit, when someone grabs my arm.

Firmly.

"Hey—" I call out, alarmed.

I whirl about, facing a young Asian person.

"Hello Juliet."

I lose all my strength.

The young person, dressed in black, is pulling me slowly but powerfully back toward the stage. From their rigid grasp, they feel masculine. But there's a feminine quality to their face.

I stumble along in shock.

"Can we talk?" says the young person.

"No—" I say.

I wrestle their arm, trying to break free.

I feel their fingers, digging into my flesh. Behind them a young woman with platinum hair gazes at me, in a friendly way. "Please," says the young person, firmly. "If you care at all about Romeo."

What?!

A CAPULET SECRET

I lose my strength, a second time.

A wave of panic courses through me.

I scan the two strangers desperately. In microseconds I'm debating whether to strike out at them, run for the door or scream.

"Let go of my arm," I say coolly.

The firmness of my voice surprises me. The androgynous young person smiles at me brashly. But releases me.

He gestures politely toward one of the red theater seats, where we're standing. This is my chance to run, but for some reason, I don't even consider it.

I glare at them, sitting down.

Strangely I am not uncomfortable. In fact, I am weirdly comfortable—for being in the company of these two.

I feel a mix of defiance and fear.

And familiarity.

"Who are you?" I break the silence.

The young person in black smiles at me. He's such an intense looking person. Not exactly good-looking, but intense. His eyes are deep brown verging on black, like dark pools of destruction. Surprisingly his face is almost

ZU X ORI

charming. But there's something brutal, just beneath the surface.

"I'm Tai," he says.

As if that means something.

"Do you know about Capulet perfumes?" says the platinum woman.

Wait. What?

Woah.

I experience one of those zoom-in moments, where everything trivial disappears, leaving you only with what really matters.

I can only think one thing.

Capulet.

Of course I know their perfume. They're only the most luxurious perfume brand in the world. It's like asking someone, do you know Versace? Do you know Calvin Klein? Do you know Gucci? But I'd never connected the perfume to my story.

Instantly, I know what this is about.

But I also *don't* know.

My first thought is: *they're here for me.*

A CAPULET SECRET

I blurt out:

"But you're not Italian!"

I feel so stupid.

"Neither are you—" Tai retorts.

Tai is shaking his head. "Such old-fashioned thinking," he says. "*You can't be a Capulet unless you're Italian!* I expected more from you, Juliet."

"And I am Italian," the platinum one replies. Yes, her voice *does* sound Italian.

I'm disoriented.

"If you must know," Tai says leisurely. "My uncle, the chairman of Zhu perfumes, purchased the House of Capulet several years ago."

Zhu?

But that's my name.

I stare at the two of them, perched at the edge of my seat. Like a trapped animal.

"So it's still a *family* business," Tai looks at me.

Why did he say it like that?

ZU X ORI

I'm observing the warm-eyed woman with platinum hair. She smells sweetly of lilac. "This is Lucrezia," Tai introduces her, "my assistant."

There's an angelic glow to her features. And a sadness hidden below her surface. She feels like beautifully contained sorrow.

This meeting is altogether creepy. But what's strangest is how familiar these two feel. Lucrezia gazes at me in a weirdly caring way.

Tai sits beside me.

"I know what's happened," he says.

"What's that?" I feign ignorance.

Tai just stares at me. It's a deep, penetrating stare that goes straight through me. It's otherworldly. As if he can see my thoughts.

I barely inhale, but I catch his scent for the first time, a smell of hot, burning metal.

Again, strangely familiar.

"Can I tell you a story?" he says.

"How do you know me?" I demand.

"Patience, Juliet," Tai says, casually.

"I'm Zu," I say defiantly.

A CAPULET SECRET

Tai smiles, charmingly.

"But also Juliet," he emphasizes each word. I can't say he's wrong, which I like even less. "How much do you know," Tai asks me, "about the Capulets?"

I don't respond, so he continues.

"Shakespeare didn't say much about us," Tai says reflectively. "He never mentioned *our craft*. We were a simple family business—with a tradition of being the best perfumers in Europe. No one knows exactly when the first Capulet perfumes were made, but the knowledge was passed down the generations, from father to son—and from father to daughter," Tai directs his gaze toward me. "Back then, it wasn't all about profits. It was pride in making something perfect."

"Back when?" I say, downplaying my curiosity.

"This story begins about five hundred years ago," says Tai. "Just before you were born."

He smiles slyly.

"In Verona," he says.

I sink into the red theater seat, as if I can escape what Tai is saying.

How does he know this?

ZU X ORI

"The secret of the Capulets," Tai continues, "is that we understand the world of fragrance. Better than anyone."

I want to run away. None of this makes sense, but I know I have to stay. "Do you know what this means, Juliet?" Tai quizzes me.

"Don't call me that."

"What is unlocked by the sense of smell?" Tai keeps asking questions.

As if he expects me to know.

"I don't know—" I hesitate.

"Think, Juliet!" Tai's voice explodes. I feel stunned. But I still don't know.

"Memory," says Tai.

He says the word like a magic spell.

"When you catch a fragrance in the air," Tai explains, "what does it trigger? A memory of the past! We can't always place it, but we feel we're actually *there*. That the past is happening all over again! Smell is the most subtle of our senses. It's the most unconscious, and therefore the most powerful. It holds our deepest, most forgotten memories."

I know this from my own experience.

A CAPULET SECRET

I remember nights strolling down a summer lane, smelling lily, instantly remembering my parents' house when I was five. I can't say I like Tai and Lucrezia.

I'm repelled by both of them.

But I'm fascinated at the same time.

"People came to us, from around the world," Tai says, matter-of-factly, "because we made perfumes that helped them remember! Noblemen, priests, queens—even popes! Everyone wanted to recall their most cherished, forgotten memories. Childhood memories were the most popular—those innocent years when life is so pure. You wouldn't believe how grown men and women longed for their childhood. Powerful men and women—who had everything in the world—their greatest desire was to remember their childhood. That's the power of innocence."

Tai is grinning, looking at me.

I stare ahead.

"Do you know the second most requested memory?" he asks, still grinning. "Guess."

I'm startled.

I'm so engrossed in the story, I don't expect another question. And why is Tai asking *me*?

ZU X ORI

"Love," I say, automatically.

"Exactly!" Tai exclaims.

His excitement surprises me.

"That's very good," he smiles. "First loves, past loves—any loves! We all want to relive the love of our lives—our memories of a person we've long forgotten. Usually, it's our first love. Someone who opened us to our innermost feelings, someone who touched us more than anyone else. You see, Zu," Tai pauses, using my name, "this is the real secret: most of all, we want to remember ourselves! How we felt, how we *were*—when we were most ourselves. But we don't realize this. So we try to remember when we were the most touched, the most present, the most alive in our lives. When we remember these times, we begin to remember ourselves."

I am fascinated. It is exactly true.

"We started making perfumes by request," says Tai. "Soon it wasn't just love and childhood. It was everything. Travel memories, military expeditions, family outings, evidence in court cases. Even lost keys! You wouldn't believe what people wanted to remember! Another favorite was children, especially if they had died. A mother's most cherished memories of her young children. Never

A CAPULET SECRET

underestimate a mother's longing for her children, or her loss, when they grow up."

I no longer feel threatened.

Or want to escape. Not with what's happening here. In some way, I belong here.

"Why are you telling me this?" I ask directly.

"Because, Zu," Lucrezia smiles at me, "you are part of the story." I close my ears to this. I don't trust her, even if what she says rings true.

"Our customers began coming to us, with an even bigger challenge," Tai continues. "Do you know what they wanted to remember?"

"Their past lives," I answer.

I am absolutely certain. I don't know how I know. But the Juliet part of me knows.

Somehow she knows.

Tai claps his hands, his eyes almost bright.

"Bravo!" he exclaims. "We weren't sure this was possible. We didn't even know if people *had* past lives! All we knew was that some fragrances could trigger memories in people—of which they had *no recollection*. Do you

ZU X ORI

understand, Zu? They had a memory—but it had never happened to them. At least not in their current life!”

Of course I understand.

I am unnerved how well I understand.

“We took it as a challenge,” Tai says. “We set out to create our greatest fragrance: a past-life memory perfume. But no matter how many fragrances we tried, we failed! We were about to give up hope.”

“And?” I say, surprising myself.

Tai and Lucrezia both smile. Something in their smiles disarms me.

“And then you were born,” Tai says, simply.

I sit there, trying not to react. Trying not to give my emotions away. I don’t know if he’s telling the truth, but everything in me feels defensive.

“To make this perfume, we needed someone with an amazing nose,” Tai tells me. “But also someone with imagination—a dreamer—who could understand the deepest secrets of memory. In the Middle Ages, this type of person was called melancholic. The melancholic person was always day-dreaming, going back into their memories, obsessing, re-living them over and over. They would listen

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to music, or gaze at the stars or across a meadow, and fall into their memories and imagination.”

Again I recognize this in myself.

It’s in the way I draw—going so deeply inside myself. I want Tai to be wrong about me. To prove he’s crazy.

But he keeps being right.

“Nowadays we think everyone is equal,” Lucrezia adds. “But it’s not true! If you aren’t melancholic, you have no idea how well you can remember. Melancholics are the masters of memory.”

“So when you were born, Juliet,” Tai says proudly, “we knew we’d found who we needed. Who else was such a dreamer as you? From an early age, you could smell a rose across the courtyard. We began training you in the art of fragrance. You were the future of the Capulets.”

I’m shell-shocked and can’t speak.

“Needless to say,” Tai makes a sour face, “we were all very disappointed when you fell for Romeo, obsessed over him—and killed yourself within a week!”

Tai looks almost angry.

But I am furious.

ZU X ORI

"It was out of love!" I sit forward. "What do you know anyway? We brought the families together—the Capulets and Montagues. Our deaths ended the feuding!"

I stop abruptly.

I realize I'm speaking about my past memories with a possibly crazed stranger. I feel exposed, vulnerable, and somewhat silly.

Tai looks at me smugly.

"That was just a business dispute," he says. "It would have blown over. You and Romeo killed yourselves for nothing." Again I feel powerless. I don't know if he's telling the truth.

I've lost my mooring in reality.

"We need you, Zu," Tai steps forward. "We've come to stop you from making the same mistake."

"Mistake?" I say.

"Romeo," Tai answers.

My anger boils over. "Romeo was *not* a mistake! How did you find me anyway?"

"How did we find you?" Tai is laughing. "The same way you found Romeo—we're connected to you. That's the first rule of reincarnation! You find people you knew in the past."

A CAPULET SECRET

Tai could probably tell me whatever he wanted right now, and I'd believe him. Or maybe not. "So you're reincarnated too?" I challenge him.

"Zu," Tai sighs. "Everyone is reincarnated."

I stare down at the red carpet. What Tai is saying is exactly what I was thinking on the subway. But hearing it from him feels horrible. I feel I've stepped into a much bigger world, where I hardly know anything.

"I'm not leaving Orion," I say.

It's the only thing I know. I cling to it.

"Ah, that's his name," Tai says.

I guess one thing they don't know is names. Until I told them. "Well, then you'll be responsible," says Tai casually, "when he dies. Just like last time."

"What?" I nearly leap up.

"Wake up, Zu—" Tai nearly spits. "If you want to save Orion, then let him go."

Save Orion?

What is Tai talking about?

"I don't believe you," I say.

"Show her," Tai turns to Lucrezia.

ZU X ORI

Lucrezia reaches calmly into her pocket. She sits beside me and opens her palm. I see a smooth piece of metal, shaped into a curve, like a shell. In her other hand, she holds a small, glass vial.

Inside is a deep, blue liquid.

"This is Orpheus," Lucrezia holds the vial between her fingers. "It's experimental."

She releases one blue drop from the vial. I watch it falling, then colliding into the curved dish.

It's a small bubble.

The color of deep, blue sapphire.

"Everything has a smell, Zu," Lucrezia reminds me. "Wood, concrete, metal, even glass. But most people can't smell them. Orpheus also has a smell." Lucrezia extends her palm toward me, holding the curved shell and blue drop of liquid. "If your sense of smell is as keen as I've heard," she says, pleasantly, "then you should be able to smell Orpheus, right about—now."

And I do.

It's like nothing I've ever smelled. How can I describe it? It smells *clean*—but not like a cleaning product. It's like a clean wind, like a fragrance that is *on the way*. It's the opposite of memory.

A CAPULET SECRET

It's the future.

Now I'm seeing images in my mind. Like memories—except it's nothing that's happened yet.

It's what *will* happen.

"We've waited too long, Zu," I hear Tai, distantly, "for you to repeat the same mistake."

I barely pay attention to him.

The images I'm seeing are too extraordinary. Everything is swirling, darkness and dense black clouds. It's a storm, I realize—a tremendous black storm covering the entire skyline over New York City. It's the middle of the day, but the sun is completely blacked out. The wind whips wildly and rain is coming down in torrents. People in the streets are running for cover, umbrellas blow open. Newspapers and shopping bags, anything not nailed down, are flying through the air.

I see a large brick building—a building I've never seen. It has large, classical windows and arches. The storm is raging above the building.

What I'm seeing feels like a memory. But it's nothing I've experienced. The emotion I feel is dread. Now I'm seeing inside another building. I see a stage or platform and a crowd of people. There's chaos and people are scattering.

ZU X ORI

Now the crowd is standing in a circle. Someone is inside the circle, lying on the floor.

Dead.

Oh my God, it's Orion.

No.

Noooooooo. No!

Not again.

This vision is absolutely real. Not for a second do I question it. I can't. The vision is real. I feel something inside me dying. All the heartbreak and infinite sadness I felt in Verona. Times twice.

I can't handle this.

I snap out of the vision.

Tai and Lucrezia are looking at me. Now I hate them—I want *them* to die—to disappear. They don't deserve to be here. It's like having people you hate at the funeral of your beloved. They don't deserve to see me grieve.

I'm too shattered to cry.

"The future can still be changed," Lucrezia says, gently. "But it's up to you."

I glare at her, hatefully.

A CAPULET SECRET

"We need you more than Orion," Tai looks at me. "And we have a motto at the House of Capulet," he adds. "*Una volta Capuleto, sempre Capuleto*. Once a Capulet, always a Capulet."

"He'll never leave me," I say, pushing down my fear. I wish I'd never left Orion's studio.

"So give him this," Tai nods.

He holds another glass vial in his hand. This one contains a green liquid, instead of blue.

"One breath," he says, "and Orion will forget all about Verona and your past."

"What is that?" I say with revulsion.

"It's called Nepenthe," Tai says. "It helps people forget things that are painful, like past lives." He presses the green vial into my palm.

"I don't want your—"

"Just one breath," Tai interrupts.

He closes my palm. I look down, seeing Ori's red yarn around my wrist.

"You have to act quickly," adds Lucrezia. "Every hour, the future becomes more fixed. By tomorrow, it will be too late to save Orion."

ZU X ORI

My new life has become a nightmare.

This morning all I wanted was to connect with Orion. To continue where we left off. So why is this happening? I used to have a recurring dream that I'd missed all my classes for the year, and now I had to take the final exam.

I feel hopeless like this.

Only much, much worse.

I'm scared.

"Get away from me—" I push past them. I run up the aisle, bolting out the doors of the theater.



Washington Square Park is a block away.

I burst out the theater doors and make a dash for it, running as fast as I can. As if I can outrun what just happened. As if I can leave it behind. I step into the street as a horn blares.

A car screeches to a stop.

Right in front of me.

Oh—not again!

I'm staring hard at the vehicle, frightened and half-furious. The gentle-looking woman behind the wheel looks

A CAPULET SECRET

equally terrified. We share a moment of eye contact. It's the shared anxiety and relief of a near miss.

I feel my legs trembling.

But I need to keep moving. I make my way, crossing into Washington Square Park. I don't dare look back. I'm half-expecting Tai to rush up behind me. To grab my hair.

To force me into his car.

I keep walking, eyes straight ahead.

I proceed on the park paths, as steadily as I can, as if any movement might attract attention.

The tall green oaks shelter my path. Ahead a double row of benches lines a walkway toward a tall fountain. I slow my steps, looking down at the green vial in my hand.

I'd forgotten I was carrying it.

I feel disgusted.

The glass vial feels dirty in my hands. I raise it toward my eye, to examine it closer, but my nervous fingers fumble their hold.

The glass vial slips from my grasp.

I try to grab it.

ZU X ORI

But it falls through my fingers. I watch it dropping to the pavement, where it clinks once, bouncing in the air, and then two more times.

My heart has stopped.

I bend down, reaching toward the pavement. Carefully I pick up the vial, inspecting the glass.

It appears undamaged.

I feel a conflicted sense of relief.

I slip the green vial into my pocket. I want to turn back the clock—to the safety of my world before Jack's Coffee. But then I wouldn't have met Orion.

I can't go back.

I'm here, in New York.

Ori and I are here.

I advance further into the park. People are sitting on benches and walking on the winding paths. Their lives seem so normal, so uncomplicated.

So safe.

I glance around, cautiously. How did that blue perfume make me see the future?

Or did it?

A CAPULET SECRET

And Orion's death? Was that real or did I imagine it? Everything about it *felt* so real. I'm overcome with revulsion, for everything Tai said to me.

Who is he to threaten Orion?

I take the green vial from my pocket, flinging it sideways into the grass.

I don't bother watching where it lands.

Immediately I feel better. I head toward the heart of Washington Square Park, stopping before the splashing fountain. It's a taller fountain, with a larger pool, than the one I remember from Verona. But it warms my heart nonetheless. I stand along its periphery, listening to the splashing sound of the water. Now I feel how corrupt that green vial was.

What did Tai call it?

I can't even remember the name.

Whatever it was, it was evil. Who would make something that makes people forget? I can't imagine anything so vile.

I need to see Orion, I think.

I head toward an archway in the park, toward Orion's studio. But approaching the arch, the vision returns to me:

ZU X ORI

the black storm and Orion lying dead. I stop directly under the archway.

What if the vision is true?

It strikes me how much Tai knew. About my sense of smell, my past as a Capulet.

I can't ignore that.

Have I just tossed Orion's life away?

I turn around, gradually. Nearly against my will, I backtrack to where I tossed away the green vial. *Zu*, I hear my voice, *this isn't a good idea*.

But I can't risk Orion dying.

Not again.

But where did I throw the vial? Before I know it, I'm down on my hands and knees, scavenging in the grass beside the squirrels for that evil green bottle. Except it doesn't feel so evil anymore. Now it's something I desperately need. I sit up on my knees, looking around wildly.

Where is it?

Then I see it.

In the near distance.

Between blades of grass.

A CAPULET SECRET

The clear tip of the vial is just barely visible, near the base of an oak tree. I snatch it up, sliding it safely back in my jeans pocket.

Somehow I feel stronger already.

I don't know what I'm doing.

But I can't lose Orion again. So I am giving myself time. To make the right decision.

But didn't you already decide? I hear my voice again. *When you threw it away?* I try to tune myself out. I wonder if I've just made a deal with the devil.

I exhale deeply—and call Orion.

I hear it ringing.

What am I going to say? I think.

Orion answers.

Immediately, I hang up.

Think this through. Be careful.

I stare at my phone.

I make another call.

"I need to talk to you—" I say.



EPISODE 6 **FORGET ME NOT**

ORI

It's morning on Gansevoort.

Outside my blue window, there's a beautiful sky and soft sunshine falling over the brick buildings of the Meatpacking District.

Inside, I am kissing Zu.

Her purple hair covers our faces, while her lips press toward mine. We are revolving around and around each

FORGET ME NOT

other, in the warm morning. On the railing of the fire escape, a brown starling chirps brightly.

I touch something on Zu's arm.

It's a cloth bandage, the kind they give you at the hospital. "What happened to you?" I say.

"I was hit by a car."

"What?"

"It was after kissing you," Zu embraces me warmly, "the first time." I have too many questions—so I don't ask any of them. "It's why I'm here," she smiles.

Zu's phone goes off.

"Oh, it's Kimmo—"

She pulls away, scanning the screen, then scampers across the room, collecting her backpack from the sofa. Her tablet tumbles out the unzipped opening, sliding toward me across the floor.

On the screen is a drawing.

It's a sketch of a hard-featured boy, with a thin, angry mouth.

"Who's this?" I ask.

Zu draws near me, gazing at the screen. "I'm not sure," she says, pensively. "I see him in my imagination."

ZU X ORI

She looks at me, tenderly.

"I'm late for rehearsal," she tells me.

Zu wriggles the red yarn bracelet from my wrist. "I'm taking a souvenir," she says, smiling. She slides the red bracelet over her wrist.

"So I don't forget you," she teases.

Zu hugs and kisses me, then hurries out the door. From my open window, I watch her go.



The morning passes in dreamy reverie. I stand in the shower, letting the water fall over me. Everything about me feels so different.

But I'm also the same.

I'm still Orion. I'm still the same boy with a love for starry nights and sunshine, hot cocoa and anime. And I still hate oysters.

Hermes is still my best friend.

But now there's more to the story.

It's like I have more history. I literally have more memories than I did yesterday. There's actually *more of me*.

FORGET ME NOT

Now I'm questioning all my assumptions about myself.
There's so much more data.

The water is running over my face.

Even questions as simple as:

Why did I go to Trinity Rose?

Yesterday, that was easy. My parents found the most creative school in the city. I took a tour, I met Hermes and connected with Lauren immediately. It all made sense.

But what if it was even simpler?

I do some morning exercises, hanging upside down in my gravity boots. My eyes are closed. Of course. Why hadn't I thought of this?

It makes perfect sense.

I went there to meet Zu.

It's so obvious. Of course, I went to Trinity for other reasons too. But this is the real one.

I mean, *it's Juliet*.

My life history is being edited on the fly. I didn't just leave L.A. for New York City. Now I'm seeing the bigger picture. I was living in Verona five hundred years ago, I fell in love and killed myself, and was born again in the desert outside of L.A.

ZU X ORI

And then I came here.

To meet Zu.

Is this how destiny works?

I am blending fruits in a blender. I watch my mom on a video from Italy, telling me about her vacation and asking how school is going. But my mind is a million miles away.

I approach the white dress, my smoothie in hand.

I barely resist shouting to the sky.

Out of sheer joy. Then I think: But why? Why did we meet? What is this about? Was it to love each other again? To make up for what we lost?

Do I even care?

Yes, I do.

Because I feel there's a reason.

I stand before the white dress. Now it's obvious what I never liked about it:

It was the past. The white dress was about the past.

I could never be happy with it, because it only lived in the past! How could I be happy with the past?

With only sad memories.

When there is a future.

FORGET ME NOT

I am shaken to the core. This problem of the white dress, and all the disappointment of last year: it's gone in an instant.

Now I can accept the dress.

For what it was.

I crouch down, touching the soft folds of the white dress. In my memory, I am in the cold Capulet tomb, holding the fabric of Juliet's white dress. I hold her pale hand.

I touch her pale, peaceful face.

But the memory is changing.

The feeling of complete terror—of entering the tomb and finding Juliet dead—is gradually fading. There's no more ache in my stomach.

The pain is gone.

In the tomb, Juliet opens her eyes. There's no need for pain anymore.

We are together again.

I close my eyes, beside the dress.

Imagine the biggest burden you carry. What if that weight was lifted away? Imagine if someone you loved—

ZU X ORI

your mother or your father or your best friend—had died.
Then you realize they are actually alive.

And you are with them.

Again.

Across the studio, my phone goes off.

I walk over to my work desk.

It's Zu.

"Hey—" I answer.

Zu looks flustered.

Then the call goes dead.

I call back, but Zu doesn't answer. I look out the open window, where I watched her walking away. I return to the kitchen, refilling my smoothie.

When I come back, there's a message:

Meet me in Central Park

20 minutes



I zip my red Vespa into traffic.

September in New York is my favorite month. This morning, the city is a symphony of bright and quick colors. I

FORGET ME NOT

pass the brown brick Chelsea Market, where the Oreo cookie was invented. The huge 17-story Google building is across the street.

I whiz up 8th Avenue.

At the traffic lights, I hear voices in a dozen languages, conversations about anything I can imagine. I love seeing people from all over the world. We wear hats, sunglasses and sometimes lipstick.

We're all different.

But we're also the same.



ZU

Professor Lauren is waiting for me.

She stands under a group of trees, wearing a pink cowboy hat with Lorenzo on a leather leash. It's a gorgeous day in Central Park and the fluffy trees are bright in the breeze.

I've already told her everything.

Well, except about the green vial and the vision of Ori's death. I keep those to myself.

"So they're Capulets?" she asks again.

ZU X ORI

“Not by birth,” I say.

I start to remove the green vial from my pocket—to prove I’m not crazy—when I see Orion approaching along a gravel path.

I hurry to meet him.

“What’s going on?” he says.

I’ve been thinking what to say. On the one hand, I want to tell Orion everything. But I also want to be careful. Ori spots Lauren behind me. He stops in his tracks, lowering his gaze.

“You brought Lauren?”

He sounds immediately defensive.

“I didn’t think—”

“But why?”

“Is that so bad?” I ask.

Orion doesn’t answer, but closes his eyes. Like he’s in actual pain. I don’t understand this thing between Ori and Lauren.

“What is it?” I say.

“It’s nothing,” he says, unconvincingly.

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All I want to be doing is hugging him, but right now, we're not even holding hands. We walk toward Lauren, together but separately. Like two old friends.

It's a little awkward.

I feel I know everything about Orion. But I've also lived my whole life without him. We don't have any of those endearing habits that most couples have, like a knowing glance or a special way of touching. We haven't had enough time together.

Not in this life.

"Hello, Orion," Lauren says cordially.

Ori nods coolly: "Lauren."

Oh my goodness. You know that saying about cutting tension with a knife?

"How are you?" she asks him.

Ori laughs, but not nicely.

I haven't seen this side of him. "Fabulous," he says, "without any help from you."

Lauren seems to stiffen.

"You were miserable last year," she says.

"So send me away?"

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"It was just *an idea*, Ori."

"And what would've happened?" Ori argues. "Zu would be at Trinity now. And I'd be at another school."

"You met anyway!" says Lauren.

It's like a powder keg between them. And I don't even know what they're arguing about! I had assumed the three of us would get along. I want to give them space to work things out.

But I don't have all day, either.

"Ori, we need Lauren's help," I interject. I take a quick breath. "I met Tai and Lucrezia, they're Capulets. They claim the past repeats," I pause again, "and leaving you is the only way to save your life."

"What?" says Ori.

My words sound crazy.

"They knew *everything*," I try to explain. "They knew about our past, about Verona! They showed me a vision where you were dead."

I notice Lauren looks pale.

"They said it was the future, unless—" I'm about to blurt out about the green vial in my pocket. But I quickly stop. Ori and Lauren both stare at me.

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“Unless what?”

“Unless I forget about you,” I finish my sentence, without mentioning the green vial.

Why am I keeping it a secret?

“This was this morning?” Ori looks utterly confused.

“I know it sounds crazy,” I continue. “But so was yesterday and last night! And they both felt so familiar. Tai said it’s a rule of reincarnation to find people you were connected with in your past. Is that true, Lauren?”

“So now Lauren knows everything?” says Ori.

“Shush,” I say, lovingly.

That felt oddly satisfying.

Lauren walks pensively, a bit ahead of us. Like she’s deep in thought.

Or in shock.

I’m not sure which.

Ori and I follow behind her, the green trees forming a canopy above us. At times, our arms bump against each other, which is nice.

“I don’t have any personal experience,” Lauren turns to us. “But according to tradition—there *are* laws of reincarnation. And yes, one of them is connection. The idea

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is we find people we've connected with—people we've had special experiences with in the past," she looks from me to Ori. "Often these people feel oddly familiar."

What Lauren is saying strikes me.

I've never considered the people in my life this way. Usually, it's just about whether I like them or not. Or maybe whether I admire them.

Not whether they feel *familiar*.

I quickly dive into my thoughts: Who in my life feels familiar? Do my parents feel familiar? I've known them all my life, so of course, they're familiar.

But what if I'd just met them?

Would they feel familiar then? The way I just knew Ori immediately?

That's a tough one.

"Are there other laws?" I hear Ori ask.

I am glad he's engaging Lauren.

"Another law is repetition," says Lauren. "The same challenges, or situations, tend to re-occur from life to life. That's how we learn from mistakes. By facing them again and again, until we overcome them."

I don't like hearing this.

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It's too close to what Tai was saying. About making a mistake with Romeo. What was my mistake anyway? Choosing Ori? When he was Romeo?

I don't, I can't—agree with that.

“Do the same things *have* to repeat?” I ask Lauren. I edge toward Orion, looking in his eyes, as if I might not always have that luxury. “Not necessarily,” says Lauren. “It's more about facing a similar challenge. The outcome is up to us.”

I'm reassured, somewhat.

“Is that like karma?” asks Ori.

“Exactly,” Lauren says. “Reincarnation and karma go together. Karma is about balance—the third law of reincarnation. We aren't reborn just to go around in circles. The purpose of reincarnation is to balance out the imperfections of our past lives.”

I wonder what Ori's imperfections are. So far, I haven't seen many. But I mean, no one's perfect.

Right?

Lauren continues.

“Say you mistreated someone in the past,” she says. “You might want to help them in your next life. Or maybe

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you acted shamefully. You might try to atone for it. According to the ancients, the balancing of karma affects almost every part of life—from the people we meet, to where we decide to move and live, our health, and even the way our bodies look.”

“The interesting part, for me,” says Lauren, “is about relationships. Say you knew someone in a past life. Maybe you worked together or were in a relationship. But whatever it was, it was left unfinished. You might want to find each other again.”

I watch Ori listening to her.

“To finish what you started,” he says, gazing at me with an intensity that stops my heart. I know what we started. But do I really want to finish it?

“Finish?” I say.

Ori chooses another word: “Continue?”

Lauren smiles at me, subtly. “What matters is there’s more to the story,” she says.

I’m beginning to feel better. Maybe Tai didn’t know what he was talking about after all.

“If you believe in karma,” Lauren goes on, “many of the most important people in our lives—a special friend, a romantic partner, maybe even a teacher or a student—are

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people we knew in a past life. Not everyone, of course. But the ones who feel like we've always known them."

Lauren stops walking, abruptly.

"So you actually remember your past?" she asks Orion, directly.

"Some of it."

They stand regarding each other.

"And it—" Lauren isn't sure what to say. "It matched with what Zu described?"

Orion lowers his eyes.

"Yeah," he says.

I step forward, gently.

"The Capulets say I need to help them," I put it all on the table. "To finish what I started with *them*." I feel Ori bristle at the mention of the Capulets. "Tai said I was supposed to help with a past-life perfume, when I was a Capulet in Verona."

"How does Tai know this?" Lauren asks.

We stop in front of a park bench.

"He didn't say. Only that unless I returned to the Capulets, Orion would—die." I realize I'm still not telling the entire truth. I haven't said anything about the green vial—of

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whatever—in my jeans pocket. I’m afraid that if I do, my worst fear will come true.

And I won’t be able to stop it.

But I’m also uncomfortable hiding things. I’ve never hidden anything from Orion.

Ever.

This is the first time.

“And you believe this person?” Ori asks me.

“I saw it,” I insist. “They have a perfume—it shows you the future. I saw you lying dead.”

“It could be a drug,” he argues, “a hallucination.”

It’s not impossible.

And yet.

“Ori,” I say. “It was as real as the past.”

Orion takes a few steps away from us. Then he slowly turns around.

“I’m not going to die,” he says.

Seeing him now, in the sunshine under the trees, it’s impossible not to believe him.

My vision feels foolish.

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A soccer ball bounces toward us, with a small boy chasing after it. Ori stops the ball with his foot, then playfully taps it back to the boy. Orion returns, rubbing Lorenzo's neck.

"Why don't people remember their past?" he questions Lauren. I'm glad he's asking.

I'm wondering the same thing.

"The past can be painful," says Lauren. "Imagine if you suffered a terrible loss and had to live with that pain, life after life. By forgetting the past, you get a fresh start. The Greeks thought that's how we go through life—in forgetfulness of every past life we've ever had."

I watch the sunbathers in Central Park.

Yesterday I was like them, oblivious to so much of my existence. Just another amnesia patient, comfortably sipping bubble tea.

"That reminds me," Lauren says, eagerly, "of a story in the Odyssey."

My mind is catching up. The Odyssey.

By Homer, right.

We read that in eighth grade. About Odysseus and his travels home from the Trojan War. I still remember the cyclops. And the sirens.

"It's just a brief scene," says Lauren. "There's a banquet and everyone is grieving for Odysseus, who they think has died. Helen, the hostess of the banquet, pours a special potion into the wine. The potion is so powerful that whoever drinks it will forget every suffering. Even if their family was killed before their eyes."

"What happened?" I don't remember this part.

"The guests immediately forgot their sorrows," says Lauren. "They became cheerful."

"What was the potion called?" Ori asks.

"Nepenthe," she says.

What? I nearly double over. That was the name I couldn't remember. The name of the perfume.

In the green vial.

I'm trying to balance myself. Was Tai telling the truth? Could he have actually made a perfume like that?

"Did you say Nepenthe?" I have to be sure.

Ori is walking away from us. He crosses the gravel pathway, walking into Sheep Meadow.

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"You mean that?" he points.

I look up, from my bent-over position.

Orion points to a tall building, rising above Sheep Meadow. On the building is a giant digital display. I stand upright, slowly moving closer. It's an advertisement for Capulet perfumes.

I see an elegant perfume bottle, with a green liquid inside, alongside the name: *Nepenthe*. The display changes to read: *Oblivion Is Bliss*

My mind grinds to a halt.

Tai didn't say anything about it being for sale. And I have this perfume in my pocket.

Oh my God, what's in my pocket isn't just for Orion. It's for *everyone*. "The Capulets want to make everyone forget," I say aloud.

There's no way I can help them now.

Even if I could.

"You think it really works?" Ori looks dubious. "It's probably just marketing. Why would they bother? Doesn't everyone have amnesia anyway?"

How can Orion be so relaxed? Maybe that's his imperfection, after all.

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"No—it works," I say.

Somehow I know.

"How do you know?" Ori asks me.

Again I feel trapped. I can't tell Orion about Nepenthe. If this is all real, it might be my only chance of saving his life. But I also don't want to lie.

I bite my tongue.

"I just have a hunch," I say.



Lucrezia and Tai walk down a white corridor. The ceiling, floor and walls are entirely white. Lucrezia takes note of her surroundings. It's the same corridor from her vision on the plane.

Tai massages his right hand.

He clenches and unclenches his fist. "This clenching," Lucrezia observes him, "concerns me. How long has it been happening?"

"Only a couple days," Tai shrugs.

Lucrezia looks sideways at Tai. "Did anything trigger this?" she asks. "Sometimes a traumatic past life event reappears in the body."

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"You're the expert," Tai says brashly.

Lucrezia probes him. "You only accessed your Verona life, correct?"

"That was enough," says Tai dimly.

They take a sharp left turn, arriving backstage of a large auditorium. A stage crew is on their computers, making final adjustments to the lighting. One of them approaches Tai, attaching a microphone to his loose, black shirt. Just beyond the stage, guests in fashionable outfits fill the seats of the auditorium.

Onstage a woman addresses the crowd. "We have an unexpected surprise," she says. "Tai Fang, creative director of Capulet perfumes, is here to join us."

Tai takes a deep, nervous breath.

"How do I look?" he asks Lucrezia.

"Like you."

She adjusts his shirt.

The audience leaps to their feet, cheering and clapping loudly, as Tai walks onstage. Tai grins widely, raising his hand high in the air.

Behind Tai, an enormous projection comes to life. The Capulet dagger, along with images of beautiful people and

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perfumes, fills the stage. Luxury Italian villas fade and dissolve into one other.

Tai waves to the audience, who respond in cheers. He places his hands together, as in prayer.

"My friends," Tai's voice projects through the auditorium. "Today I ask you one question: Why do we feel pain? Have you thought about this?" Tai looks from one side of the audience to the other. "Why do we have suffering?"

The audience looks toward Tai, waiting.

"Well, I thought about this," Tai says, reflectively. "And I couldn't think of one good reason. The truth is," he smiles sadly, "pain is a disease."

Tai is strolling across the stage.

The audience follows his every step. "Today is a day I've dreamed about," he says deeply. "Today is a day the world has been waiting for," Tai pauses for emphasis, "since the beginning of humanity."

He raises his left hand to the screen.

"Today we free ourselves from suffering."

Quickly changing images begin to appear: people mourning at a funeral, family members consoling each

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other, a young woman crying alone, two young men arguing and then fighting.

“Civilization has come so far,” Tai announces. “We are on the verge of ending racism, ending gender inequality, ending disease and poverty. But despite all our progress—we are still suffering!”

The images of despair continue behind Tai.

“No one *likes* pain and sadness,” he says. “But we as a species cannot escape it.” Tai flashes a victorious grin. “Until today,” he points his finger.

The screen behind Tai goes white.

“We deserve to be happy,” Tai continues. “We deserve to laugh. At the House of Capulet, we believe this with all our hearts.”

“So we made Nepenthe,” says Tai.

Cheers explode through the crowd. The auditorium floor is shaking. On the white screen appears a single image:

NEPENTHE



“Welcome to a new world,” Tai is grinning. “A world without sorrow. A world without suffering.” The crowd whistles and roars.

Tai smiles, waiting to speak.

“Three thousand years ago,” he grins, “there was a party –this is a true story, it’s in Homer. But all the guests were plagued with sorrow. The hostess knew, this was no way to party!”

Tai keeps grinning.

“So she put a secret potion into the wine,” he says, “which cured everyone’s sorrow.”

Images of Helen’s banquet play out on the screen behind Tai. All the guests, in Greek attire, are laughing and smiling at once.

“Our chemists and perfumers—and myself, personally—we labored days and years to reassemble this secret formula, as a perfume,” says Tai. The crowd can’t stop cheering.

“One breath,” Tai holds up his index finger, “and goodbye sorrow—hello happiness.”

Tai waves triumphantly, leaving the stage. As he nears Lucrezia, his eyes are tearing.

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"That was impressive," Lucrezia says.

Tai continues backstage, without stopping.

"I just realized," he turns toward her, wiping his eyes. "Juliet only knew Romeo for three days in Verona. If they hadn't killed themselves," he smirks, "they might have broken up within a week!"

Lucrezia's eyes reflect a mix of emotions.

Tai seems absolutely gleeful. "Maybe their love isn't as strong as they think."

Lucrezia changes the topic. "How can you talk about Nepenthe like that?" she asks him. "When you actually remember your past?"

Tai replies: "But I wish I didn't."

Lucrezia observes him.

"That's sad," she says.



ZU

Professor Lauren is hailing a cab.

She extends her right arm confidently, and within seconds, a yellow taxi pulls alongside the curb. The cabbie

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leans out the window, takes one look at Lorenzo and smacks his forehead.

"Lady, that's a big dog," he protests.

"This is Lorenzo," Lauren answers.

"I don't care if he's the Pope," the cabbie grumbles, "if he's gonna shed in my car."

"Animals are people too," Lauren replies. She motions to Lorenzo, who jumps onto the seat. The cabbie groans loudly, shaking his head.

Lauren has a meeting, so we've agreed to meet tonight at her apartment. That feels dangerously far from now, but I don't know what else to do. Seeing the Nepenthe ad has shaken me. It's made the Capulets and my meeting with them feel entirely real.

Lauren turns, before entering the cab.

"Zu," she suggests, "what if you talked to Tai again? Maybe it's all a misunderstanding."

"I—" I'm unsure what to say.

"Are you kidding me?" Orion steps between us. I've never seen him so adamant.

"It's just an idea, Ori," Lauren says patiently.

"It's a terrible idea."

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All the tension between them returns. They stare at each other, like the world is about to end. Finally, Lauren turns away to smile at me.

Her cab pulls away into traffic, disappearing.

Ori and I return to the park, strolling under the thin green trees. Girding myself, I attempt to put away my fears. After all, maybe Ori is right.

Maybe I am overreacting.

I decide to forget about the Capulets and Nepenthe—at least for now—and enjoy my time with Ori.

These are the first free moments we've had.

I take Ori's arm, pulling myself close. Gradually I feel him beginning to relax. He's changed from last night's blue hoodie into a white t-shirt. Nestling closer, I take a deep, though not too obvious, breath. It's difficult to describe in words how a person smells. But Ori is a mix of pewter and olive, mixed with sandalwood.

I love this scent.

To me, it feels smooth and kind of awakening. To really love someone, you have to love their scent.

All my curiosities bubble to the surface.

Who *is* this person on my arm?

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In this life, I mean. What does he like to do? What kind of friends does he have? Does he like scary movies? Sing in the shower? What does he eat for breakfast?

I want to know—everything.

Central Park is active, yet peaceful this afternoon. We leave the paved path, crossing the green grass. I disengage from Ori's arm, momentarily stepping away.

"So—" I joke. "How've you been?"

Ori cracks a smile.

"What do you want to know?" he laughs.

"Mmmm," I say, thinking it over.

I am enjoying this playful distance. "How long have you lived in New York?" I start with basics.

"Three years," says Ori. I was hoping he'd reveal more, but I don't want to push him. "I've only been here three weeks," I offer up.

"Where did you move from?"

"Hong Kong," I say. Right now, it feels further away than the moon. I find myself thinking of my mother. I can't imagine what she would say about this. I ask another easy question. "Favorite food?"

"Pistachios," Orion grins.

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"Why?"

"They're soft. But crunchy."

Ori raises his eyes.

"You?" he asks curiously.

"Umm," I reply. "Lychee?"

"The fruit?"

"Yeah," I surprise myself.

Ori is looking at me peculiarly, a mix of absorbed and admiring. Either way, I like it. We *do* have a natural chemistry. "My favorite color is green," I decide to just open up. "Maybe because I love the smell of mint," I say. "I also love astronomy, bubble tea, French poetry and—drawing." We're heading for a small cluster of trees in a clearing. "And I have hyperosmia."

"You do?"

Ori looks serious.

"That means I smell well," I smile.

"Oh," Ori exhales. "I thought it was a disease!"

We both break into laughing fits, which feels really, really good. I can feel the ice melting between us. "I didn't know what—" Ori is still laughing. "I thought maybe—" he laughs, "maybe it was something fatal."

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"No," I can't stop smiling. "No, it's not at all." I try to regain my composure. "Okay, do you have a question for me?"

Ori is thinking about it.

"Okay, my turn again," I say quickly, emboldened. I consider filtering myself, but then I just blurt out: "Have you had any girlfriends?"

I add: "Or, boyfriends?"

We take several, eternal strides.

I stifle a nervous grimace. I'm glad I'm no longer attached to Ori's arm. But I *am* holding my breath.

"No," Ori says slowly.

I'm stunned. So it *is* true.

His answer feels so honest.

This is why I asked my question in the first place. Because I want to know who Ori really is. Not just on the surface, but deep inside.

"Why not?" I ask, swallowing.

Ori gazes down at the green grass, walking. I can feel him feeling into my question.

"It never seemed right," he says simply.

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His words go through me, like a sugar high.

Our conversation is opening more in me than I expected. The way we're talking relieves me. There is a power in our honesty.

I want to pull Orion close. But I keep my distance for a little longer. We reach the clustered trees and lie in the sunny grass.

Ori is opposite me, his face to mine.

"What about you?" he says, interested.

"Oh, me? Not really," I say, embarrassed. "I had a—well, he wasn't even my boyfriend, really. He was on the soccer team," I am babbling. "It was only a week."

"What happened?"

The way Ori asks the question, simply and directly. It makes me think about it. In a way I haven't before.

"He didn't really see me," I knit my brow.

Ori nods, like he understands. Our connection is growing deeper, quickly. I feel Ori's eyes on mine. It's almost too much. I pick a daisy and roll it between my fingers to distract myself. I can feel Ori observing me. "So why did you move here?" he asks me.

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“My dad got a job here,” I say, automatically. Then I look up and say, “But I think there’s another reason.”

“What is it?” asks Ori.

“Isn’t it obvious?”

Ori doesn’t get it.

“I came to meet you,” I say quietly.

For the first time, Ori seems caught off-guard. He glances down into the grass, while I hold the daisy between my fingers.

Ori inches his head forward, slowly, until suddenly we are kissing. Our bodies extend just far enough to meet at our lips.

I’m surrounded by Ori’s olive and pewter scent.

It’s sublime, intoxicating. I taste the soft tips of his lips. All around us, the park is peaceful and calm. I smell the verdant soil and the sharp tang of the grass. There is a whirlwind of city scents from Central Park West, wafting in the air, and the dusty, woody bark and branches of the oak tree above us.

Everything feels right.

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Being here with Ori, I feel the shock of the time crossing wearing off. Within me, my experiences are beginning to integrate.

Both of my lives—Agnes Zhu and Juliet Capulet—are actually the same person. Well, not *exactly* the same. It's totally different being born in a different century, on a different continent. I mean, I no longer understand Italian. And I don't really like pasta.

But *the real me* isn't Juliet Capulet.

Or even Agnes Zhu.

The real me is bigger than both of my lives. They're just different expressions of who I really am.

This feels important.

I've lived my whole life as Agnes Zhu. I know this person inside and out. But *the real me* is more of a mystery. Someone I am just starting to know.



Lucrezia follows Tai into an open concourse, where red-smocked Capulet employees offer Nepenthe samples to the crowd. Tai and Lucrezia wander about, mingling with the stylish guests.

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The Capulet employees wave green-dabbed paper strips over people's noses. Instantly their expressions change. Their eyes gloss hazily.

Some of them begin giggling.

"If I'm honest," Lucrezia says. "Of everything you could have created. Why forgetfulness?"

"To each their own," Tai replies.

"It's crude," she says, "compared to memory."

"Don't be snobby, Lu," Tai says smugly. "They're two sides of the coin. What's one without the other?"

The whole concourse is buzzing.

It feels like all of New York is here. VR bloggers and photographers mix with socialites in colored suits and t-shirts, handbags and heels.

"Do you really think Zu will help us?" Lucrezia asks, quietly concerned. "I'm counting on her help."

"You know the prophecy."

"That was long ago."

Tai looks ahead.

"Destinies don't expire," he says.



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An interested, older woman is asking Lucrezia about the launch. "Our official drop isn't for another two days. But you can try a sample today," Lucrezia tells the woman. "This is Tai's creation. It's very personal to him."

Tai stands by, proudly.

"I loved Calliope," the woman informs him.

"I promise you," Tai charms her, "Nepenthe will make you forget all about Calliope."

"Ooh," swoons the woman.

Another perfumer cozies up to Tai.

The perfumer wears a short goatee, salted black and white, and red-rimmed glasses. "Tell me," he plies Tai, "what is the secret?"

"Johan," Tai pats his back, "my lips are sealed."

"Just a clue," Johan begs. Tai shakes his head firmly. Johan, the perfumer, claps his hands in admiration, smiles and takes off through the crowd.

For a moment, Lucrezia and Tai are alone.

They stand before a window of the New York skyline, beside a long table covered with a white tablecloth, champagne glasses and rose petals. Guests are chatting

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among the hors d'oeuvres. One of them is a darkly toned woman, wearing an impeccable white suit.

Tai approaches the long table.

The woman in the white suit finishes her conversation, meeting Tai beside the vase of rose petals. She smiles warmly.

"Hello Tai," she says.

"Santiago," Tai greets her, respectfully.

"It seems the perfume business is booming," Santiago sips sparkling water from a glass.

Tai allows a shy grin.

"Care to try Nepenthe?" a Capulet employee appears, waving a green strip in Santiago's direction. The odorized vapor wafts rapidly into the air, expanding in range, ten million molecules of Nepenthe drifting toward Santiago. In a half second, the misty green odor encircles Santiago's nose, engulfing her sense of smell.

"Lovely," she says, calmly.

Lucrezia notices Santiago's lack of reaction. "My compliments on the fragrance," Santiago says. "But I *am* concerned about the effect."

She gazes at Tai.

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“Forgetfulness?”

Tai drops his social smile. He steps closer to Santiago, lowering his voice.

“It’s what people want,” he explains.

“Is that so?” says Santiago.

“Life is hard sometimes,” Tai asserts. “Why shouldn’t we have an escape? If people want to forget their pain, who are we to stop them?”

Santiago smiles imperceptibly. Her eyes have an otherworldly depth. As if the whole universe lay hidden behind them.

“People also want to feel,” she says, matter-of-factly. “Pain and sorrow aren’t comfortable, but they help us understand who we are,” Santiago looks at Tai. “Life’s not meant to be numb.”

Tai’s confident exterior is fading.

“You won’t try to stop us, will you?” he asks.

Santiago pours sparkling water into her glass. She appears to be thinking about a thousand things at once, assimilating a thousand insights in the simple act of pouring water.

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"No, we won't stop you," Santiago looks from Tai to Lucrezia, like she's seeing their thoughts. "But consider this a friendly warning," her eyes burn. She takes a last sip of water, stepping past Tai and Lucrezia into the crowd.

Lucrezia turns quickly to Tai.

"Why didn't it affect her?" Lucrezia asks, puzzled. Tai has a faraway gaze. He stares into the crowd where Santiago has gone.

"She's a Montague," he says.



ZU

Ori and I leave the daisy patch behind.

We climb a winding stairway toward a bluff. Ahead of us is a stone building, like a miniature castle. A sign says it's named Belvedere Castle and built in 1869. We explore a wooden gazebo, overlooking a pond with small turtles. We sit on a stone wall above the pond.

I lean against Ori, letting him support me. We are definitely getting comfortable.

"Tell me about your drawing," he says.

"Oh," I say.

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Except for Lauren and Kimmo, no one ever asks me about my drawings. But maybe, it's also because I never talk about them.

"Well—my drawings are stories," I say, finding the words. "They tell a story."

Ori is staring out over the pond.

As if he's seeing the future.

"What kind of story?" he asks.

I smile, self-consciously. "That's a good question," I pause. "I kept trying to figure that out," I say. "I kept feeling that my story—the story I had to tell—would come through my drawings."

Ori is looking at me.

"But it always felt out of reach," I continue. "So I just kept drawing."

"And what happened?"

"I met you."

Orion turns to me, not understanding. "The drawing on my tablet," I say. "From the moment I made it, I always felt I knew this person—and it was you. Somehow I drew you. It was buried inside me."

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Ori is gazing over the pond again. He is contemplating something.

"That happened to me too," he says.

"I know," I say. "The white dress."

I am starting to be able to read his expressions. "We both like creating," Ori observes.

A spark lights up inside me. I've just discovered a link with Ori that's beyond him just being Romeo. Beyond Verona.

Beyond our past.

An interest we share, here and now.

"I want to *do things* together," I say impulsively.

I feel my inspiration bubbling up.

"We only had *three days* together," I say at once. "In Verona—we didn't have time to do anything! But now we have time."

A reminder of Nepenthe intrudes on my mind, but I push it away. Across the pond, the tiny turtles peek up from the thin reeds.

We scamper down a pathway that descends from Belvedere Castle. I've completely forgotten about Lauren and this morning. Now it's only Orion and I. In the trees

ZU X ORI

above us, I hear birds and distant voices across the park. We descend a long wooden stairway. Ori is just ahead of me. There's a rhythm in the way we're walking, as if our bodies are in sync.

"What else do you want?" Orion asks me.

It's another question I'm not used to. But with Ori, I feel I can say anything. "Let's see," I begin, playfully arching my neck. "A hundred sunny days in a row, a boba tea machine, a little dog robot, edible pencils," I'm feeling pretty good about my list, "and my driver's license."

"You don't have a license?"

"Nope."

I take another step on the stairs. I have one more thing on my list.

"I want to tell a great story," I say.

There's a strength in my voice. This is the first time I've admitted this, even to myself. Somehow saying this aloud feels powerful.

Again I catch that look in Orion, like he's seeing into the future.

"Anything else?" he asks.

"Maybe," I say.

FORGET ME NOT

I can't think of anything. But I want to keep my options open. In the humid green air, I can smell the evening drawing near.

This is the happiest I have ever felt.

Below the stairway is a tall bronze statue. Ori and I approach it together.

It's a statue of two young people, embraced in a kiss. Inscribed on the concrete block below the figures are the names: Romeo and Juliet.

"Look at this!" I exclaim.

We stand there, with strange expressions on our faces. Ori looks somewhere between puzzled, disbelieving and hilariously amused. I start to speak out, but I don't know what to say. So I just cover my mouth.

A man in a brown shirt passes by us, looking up at the bronze statue. "If only love was like that!" he gestures passionately.

We burst out laughing.

"It looks *nothing* like us," Ori observes.

He takes out his phone. We stand before the statue, wipe the smiles from our faces and look straight ahead, in an ironic, hardcore kind of way.

Ori snaps our selfie.



Santiago steps toward a towering grey building. She smooths her jacket, then strides up the stairs toward the entrance.

A doorman opens the door.

“Welcome back,” the doorman smiles.

Santiago nods, her eyes narrow slightly. Behind the doorman appear several ghostly images. Faded and transparent, they are like old photos from the past. The first is an elderly woman, who covers her head in a shawl. Further in the background—as if further back in time—a man with a bald head and determined look stares ahead. Behind this image is a third one, barely visible—a young boy.

All this happens in an instant, as Santiago passes the doorman, stepping into the lobby.

“Have a lovely day,” she says.

The doorman, and the faded images, all smile back.

Santiago passes through the hotel lobby. A crowd of tourists and business people mingle in groups. Ghostly images arise behind each of them. A tired looking

FORGET ME NOT

accountant behind a businessman, a lazy gambler behind a tourist, a monk with a shaved head behind the hotel bellman. The entire lobby is filled with the faded images of people's past lives.

Santiaga notices them all, without changing her stride. At the rear of the lobby, she enters an open elevator.

The doors close behind her.

Santiaga stands alone in the elevator.

When the doors open, she steps out into an airy suite, decorated in a modern style. The windows are open and curtains blow lightly in a breeze. There is a large desk with papers, several paintings on the elegant walls, dark handcrafted chairs and tall ceilings.

Santiaga walks directly across the room, unbuttoning her white jacket. She drops it over an armchair and continues toward a set of double doors. She pushes open the double doors in a single, graceful motion. Without pausing, she enters a large room.

Santiaga smiles softly, her left palm upraised. "Now is the fun part," she says quietly.

She takes two or three steps and is engulfed in bluish white light. Her body, and the entire room, are infused with luminous, blue white light.



EPISODE 7 | TRUSTED YOU

ZU

Dusk falls over New York City.

The lampposts of Central Park flicker to life, in white and amber hues. Orion and I walk a winding path in the early blue evening. The silence of the dusk is beating upon the treetops.

An ash-like scent of leaves fills the air.

Evening joggers pass by, as a horse-drawn buggy rattles along in front of us. I hear the clacky-clack of their

I TRUSTED YOU

hooves. All of Central Park is blue and peaceful. Ori and I don't say anything. We don't have to. I'm just watching and listening.

Letting life happen.

Anything is possible. If I just let it happen.

We near a restaurant with outdoor seating, festive lights swaying overhead from wires. I can't even remember the last meal I ate.

Was it really soup at Lauren's place?

Yesterday?

My belly is like a hungry monster. I grab Ori, practically dragging him toward the tasty smells.

"Wanna have a meal?" I say.

"That's the Tavern," he says, like that's supposed to mean something.

"Aren't you hungry?" I ask again.

I scan the outdoor menu. Quickly I spot burgers, minestrone soup and fish and chips, among many other choices. This place will be perfect.

The friendly host seats us outside.

I'm not sure I've ever had a meal with Orion.

ZU X ORI

We can see Sheep Meadow, where Lauren met us earlier, from our table. For a while we just sit relaxing, watching the people in the park. I take a sip of my water. This is the most normal I've ever felt with Orion. For once, no one is fighting or crying or running away. I watch Ori, tugging absently at his necklace.

I look down at the red yarn, on my wrist.

I'm wondering: what would it be like to just have normal time with Orion?

Without any drama.

Just the two of us, and New York City.

I've never had anyone like that. Someone I could trust and share anything with. I always envied those couples I saw at school, who had someone they could depend on. How would it feel to be so close to someone? So trusting? I guess I know.

But that was a long time ago.

I'm ready for more.

Ori looks at the menu: "*Oh no, oysters.*"

Our waiter arrives quickly. I order the burger, medium rare, with fries and extra cheese. And the minestrone soup.

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Ori gets the fish and chips, which also sounds really appetizing to me.

I feel like making a toast.

But to what? I rapidly imagine a few scenarios: "*Here's to reincarnation!*" Way too weird. "*Here's to rebirth.*" Too nerdy intellectual. "*Here's to us!*" Too vain, by far. "*To second chances?*" Too corny. "*Here's to love.*" That's not bad, but maybe better left unspoken.

"I love you," I say.

I've never said anything so real.

Across the table, Ori's eyes fasten to mine. Again it's the power of honesty. I feel his eyes speaking to me, beyond any words.

Orion smiles.

The festive amber lights twinkle overhead. Our waiter appears with a basket of bread.

"I saw your stream," I say.

"You did?" says Ori. His eyes flash back, recollecting what I might be talking about. "Wait—" he says suddenly. "Do you mean?"

"Before we met."

I watch his eyes, "You came to the screen."

ZU X ORI

Ori is remembering, wordlessly. *"I felt that—"* he says. Now I'm speechless, too. "I went to the screen," he says, "and waited."

He looks astonished.

"I was about to post—" I add, quickly, "but I chickened out." I don't know what else to say. We are both feeling an amazement for—what?

The world, I guess?

Life?

There is a melody playing in the restaurant. It moves into the silence between us, perfectly. I don't know what the music is, but it's perfect.

For this moment.

"Why did you drop out?" I ask calmly.

Ori doesn't seem to react—not outwardly—but I can feel I've hit a nerve. "I didn't drop out," he says, firmly. "I'm just not in school."

What's the difference, I wonder.

"But why?" I say.

Ori looks challenged. For a moment, I'm not sure he's going to tell me.

I TRUSTED YOU

"I had a difficult year," he says, uncertainly. "It was unlike me. I'm an outgoing person, usually," he looks up at me. "But I wasn't feeling like myself. Lauren tried to help, she thought if I transferred—" he doesn't finish the sentence. "I didn't feel there was anything there for me. Everything I was looking forward to—wasn't there anymore."

He looks down at his napkin.

"What were you looking forward to?"

I wait silently.

"I don't know," he answers.

"I was supposed to come last year," I say immediately. "But my dad's job got delayed."

"Is that true?" Ori literally demands.

"Yes," I state.

Ori sits back in his chair, painfully. Like he's recovering from something. "All last year," he says, "it was like something was ripped away." We sit under the twinkling lights.

Orion feels raw, exposed. Vulnerable.

I like it.

It lets me feel him, even more.

ZU X ORI

Ori is letting me inside his world. And maybe, I am doing the same. I say, delicately, "Maybe you could come back now."

Ori looks toward me.

I am seeing a whole other side of him. I had no idea what he was carrying inside. Something about this almost brings me to tears.

"You could enter The Lights," I say.

Ori looks at me, openly.

"I'm sure they'd make room for you," I say, eagerly. "It'd be a great way to come back. And you've already won twice," I say, proudly.

I feel like Ori is actually considering it. "I have a better idea," he says.

"What?"

I can feel my anticipation.

"Why don't you enter?" he says.

"Me?"

I check my fears, and exhilaration.

Subconsciously, I'm telling myself it's too much. I don't deserve it. I haven't worked hard enough. I'm not good enough. But another part of me is interested.

I TRUSTED YOU

"No," I say.

"No?"

"No," I answer. "It's only two days away!"

"It's spontaneous. That's the point."

"It doesn't matter—" I protest. "I don't have any—" I stop in mid-sentence. What am I going to say? I don't have any talents?

Just like Kimmo said to me.

"I don't know what I'd do," I re-phrase myself, as calmly as I can. Ori is observing me across the table. Catching his gaze, I ground myself.

"Tell your story," he says, simply.

I feel Ori is saying something to me. Something important. But I backpedal.

"What story is that?" I ask him.

"The one you have inside," he says.

I push my foot into the stone patio. I feel cornered by these words.

"But that story's already been told," I point out. "Shakespeare wrote it and everyone knows it!"

ZU X ORI

"That's not your story," says Ori, patiently. "That's a story written *about* us—by someone else. The story you have to tell is different."

It's true, I can feel it.

"What Shakespeare wrote was only Act One," Ori leans forward on the table. "And it's already happened! There's more to your story."

He's right.

I can feel the power in that.

But I still don't know what it means. I appreciate Ori encouraging me, but I feel like he's asking too much. I have no idea how to do this.

I shake my head, smiling.

"I'm not ready," I say.

"No one's ready," Ori says easily. "If you're ready, it's probably too late."

I inhale deeply.

I'm reminded of what my dad once said. When a chance comes along, we're never ready. That's how you know you should do it.

Like on the High Line, when I kissed Ori. I wasn't ready for that.

I TRUSTED YOU

Now look at us.

"I can help you," Ori offers.

Something in me wants this so much. It feels like the reason Ori and I are here.

To do something together.

"I know how The Lights works," Ori entices me. "We'll have Lauren save you a spot."

I'm on the verge of agreeing, crazily.

"But what am I gonna do?" I point out the main obstacle. "I don't even *know* my story!"

"Everyone has a story," Ori says, confidently. "That's the easy part. You just choose how you want to tell it. In whatever way you want."

I sip my water, seriously, then place my glass back on the table. "Okay," I accept the challenge. "On one condition."

Orion looks interested.

"You go back to Trinity," I say.

He smiles, leaning back nervously.

Or hesitantly.

"The day after The Lights," I add, firmly.

ZU X ORI

Orion looks at the table. I am hoping so hard he says yes. His eyes rise, lightly.

“Okay,” he agrees. “It’s a deal.”

I feel a joy escaping in my heart. Although it doesn’t make sense, I feel we’ve agreed to something larger than The Lights and Trinity Rose.

This is what I want.

I smell our food arriving.

In a moment, our waiter appears with our plates, placing them in front of us. Ori’s fish and chips looks even tastier than I imagined.

We dig in, savoring our meals. Now Ori seems as hungry as I am. We begin chatting easily, between mouthfuls, about all kinds of things. About our lives, our friends, about who we are. It feels so simple, like with a friend you’ve known forever. I tell Ori about Trinity and my classes, and further back—growing up in Hong Kong. The beaches I loved, my friends and doing karaoke, and the humid, green hills.

I taste Ori’s fries and a bite of his fish. The amber lights are sparkling above our heads. Orion is telling me about the desert and his family, and about his sister, how close they were when he was younger, and how she died in a car

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accident four years ago. He tells me this calmly, while I listen. Then he moves on, to Hermes, how brilliant and wonderful he is, and about the interesting company that Hermes' dad started.

But I'm still thinking of his sister.

Ori's phone buzzes, beside his fries.

"Hey," Ori looks up, his eyes happy. "Do you want to meet my friends? They're at Hermes' house."

"Yeah," I say.

Of course. Everything feels easy now. I'd love to dive deeper into Ori's world.

"Oh, wait—" I say.

We are leaving our table. "What about Lauren?" Remembering our meeting with Lauren is like a bucket of icy water. It brings back all the gravity.

The Capulets. Ugh.

"We'll just drop by," says Ori. "Then head over to Lauren's." It sounds reasonable.

Ori and I feel so strong now.

Indestructible.

"Okay," I smile.



The purple evening has settled over the paths of Central Park. Ori and I walk toward a red scooter, parked nearby.

“Hop on,” he says.

Ori places a helmet in my hands. Our interactions feel so effortless now.

I climb on the back.

We head out through the park, the leafy branches streaking by above us, illuminated in the glowing streetlamps. I wrap my arms snugly around Ori’s waist, a warm breeze over my face.

We exit the park and enter Columbus Circle among a herd of yellow cabs. I watch the lighted fountains at play inside the circle, calm amid the swirling traffic. We escape the circle, onto Broadway. Ori accelerates and we pass traffic lights, drug stores and banner displays for movies, plays and shows. I gaze up at the passing advertisements, like stars in the night. All of Broadway jumps with giant displays, some three or four stories tall.

Ahead are bright, white lights.

I TRUSTED YOU

They rise, like beacons, upon the sides of buildings. Ori changes lanes, pulling alongside a shiny tour bus. On either side of us are gift shops, nail salons and delis, Asian restaurants, yellow three-wheeled pedicabs and bicyclists in the green bike lanes.

The lights ahead grow brighter.

It's like a temple in the night. I hear Ori saying *Times Square*. There are people everywhere, crossing a sparkling stone concourse under the towering lights. There are so many displays and flashing ads that I don't know where to look, or rest my eyes. Mounted police on horseback watch over the crowds.

Ori pulls us over. He removes his helmet, smiles at me and gets off the scooter. I walk with Ori into the heart of Times Square. The lights and buildings only seem to grow, as we pass through the crowd. People move in every direction. I feel the world revolving around Times Square, with us at its center.

Ori gazes up at our surroundings.

One of the tall displays catches his attention. He steps toward it, then stops. Ori stands still, his darkened outline before the massive light.

ZU X ORI

I walk toward him, standing beside him before the four-story display. We are two dark silhouettes against a blazing glory of light. Stretching out my fingers, I take Ori's right hand in mine. We stare into the animated faces and tv shows, fashion shoots and digital static, bouquets of green and yellow flowers exploding like fireworks.

For the first time in New York, I feel at home.

The images are cascading in flashing waves. Waterfalls change to oceans and beaches, then disappear again in gauzy bursts of light.

Somehow in these lights is my future.

Is Ori's future. Is our future. I can't explain it in words. But in these fireworks of light is everything Ori and I can become.

We leave Times Square behind.

I press myself behind Ori's back, my arms tightly across his chest. The skyscrapers of New York grow darker, as I lean my helmet against Ori's, listening to the purr of the scooter and the passing cars.

We stop at a traffic light.

Across the intersection is another bright, green ad for Nepenthe. It sits atop a square, glass building, with the Capulet dagger adorning the storefront windows. Inside are

I TRUSTED YOU

fancy-dressed guests, while others arrive outside in expensive cars.

Ori turns his helmet sideways, as we pass. The street is lined with lamppost banners for Nepenthe. I look back as we ride on, until the Capulet store is left behind.

But I can't escape it.

It stains my memory, like a black cloud.

We arrive on a quiet, tree-lined avenue, slowing down outside a large, brick building. Ori parks the scooter and we both get off. I remove my helmet, my hair sweeping out. I reach into my pocket, when something falls out onto the stone sidewalk.

With a loud clink.

Oh no.

I scamper after the green glass vial.

"What's that?" Ori eyes me.

My stomach plunges.

Everything I've been trying to avoid—the Capulets, the vial of Nepenthe and the vision of Ori's death—comes crashing back at once.

"Oh nothing," I scoop it up. "It's just a sample."

ZU X ORI

I'm not sure what's worse. The idea of Ori dying, or the way I feel about what I've just said.

Another lie.

It feels like a cancer growing.

But I can't tell Orion about Nepenthe. Can I? I could, but I'm too afraid.

So I don't.



I smile tightly and take Ori's hand.

He seems to believe me. We cross the street toward the large, brick building. It's actually more of a mansion. Coming closer, the trees begin to recede, and I can see the building unobscured.

My steps slow to a stop.

I can't believe what I'm seeing.

The brick mansion is the same building I saw in the vision at the theater. From Lucrezia's blue perfume. I can't deny it.

Or question it.

It's the exact same building.

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"Zu-?"

I hear Ori's voice.

I force myself to speak.

"I've seen this building before," I say bluntly.

"Well, it's kind of historical," Ori explains. "It's been photographed a lot. Hermes' dad bought it a few years ago."

I am listening.

But I didn't see this place in a photograph.

This changes everything! It brings the reality of my vision to a whole new level. Before now, it was just an extremely real experience.

Now I have confirmation.

Does this mean everything I saw: the massive black storm, and most of all, Ori's death, is real?

But in my vision, the black storm was over the building. Now the sky is perfectly clear, not even a breeze. Does that mean the future is wrong?

Or it hasn't happened yet?

Orion and I continue toward the mansion.

ZU X ORI

We pass some kids near the gated entrance. I think maybe I recognize one of them, from Trinity Rose. I notice the watchful way they look at Orion.

"Hey guys," Ori says hello.

"Oh, hey Ori—" they say, in unison.

We ascend the wide steps to the entrance. Without bothering to knock, Ori opens the large front door and we step into a huge entryway. We're immediately greeted by a young butler in a black tuxedo.

He has two glasses on a tray.

"Care for a refreshment?" he asks.

"No thanks," says Ori.

"I'll take one."

The butler lifts one of the glasses with his elegantly gloved hand, but catches the bottom against the lip of the tray. The liquid splashes over me, while the glass shatters on the floor.

"Whoops," the butler hides a smile.

Recovering my shock, I realize I'm not wet.

"Another of Hermes' tricks," Ori looks bemused. He extends his hand through the body of the butler, waving it back and forth. "It's a hologram," he says.

I TRUSTED YOU

"Ex-cuse me," says the butler.

"Look at you two—"

I see Hermes, the boy from last night. He sounds happy to see us. "I'm so glad you made it," he ushers us in. "Come on, we're out by the pool."

We follow Hermes inside.

"Great to see you," Hermes looks at me. "I wasn't sure what happened. After you showed up last night. And I don't see Ori in school anymore," he winks at me, "since he started his sabbatical."

"Ori's returning to school," I tell him.

"Oh, really?"

Hermes glances at Ori.

"It's conditional," explains Ori.

"Ori needs a good influence," Hermes smiles at me. "He's lucky he found you."

We pass through a series of large rooms. At the doorway to one of them, I notice the most delicate blue butterflies floating in the air. I hover in the doorway, admiring them.

ZU X ORI

I'm still processing being here, inside the house from my vision. And what this means. Standing near the blue butterflies soothes me.

Even if it's only a hologram.

"Why is this house historical?" I ask curiously. I wonder if there's a reason I saw it. We are leaving the blue butterflies behind.

"It's one of the oldest in the city," Hermes replies. But I feel there's more he's not telling me.

I don't know why.

I follow Hermes and Ori outside to a stone patio overlooking the house grounds. I didn't know anyone in New York had so much space. We descend the patio stairs to a large swimming pool.

I see a group of kids around the pool.

"Look who I found," says Hermes.

The girl nearest me says: "Hi, I'm Wen."

She has short, dark hair, cut sharply at her cheekbone, and sparky eyes. From the friendly way she greets me, I feel we could be friends.

A boy with a thick, blond mohawk stands up behind Wen. "Angelo," he extends his hand.

I TRUSTED YOU

"Zu—" I shake it.

There's something unusual about Hermes' friends. For one thing, they all look so unique. Back home, everyone kind of dressed the same. We even wore uniforms to school. If anything, I was the unusual one.

But it's also something else.

"You got Ori out of hiding," Angelo says.

"Did I?" I say.

"We're all in debt to you, Zu," Angelo laughs, whimsically.

They seem to know Ori pretty well.

"Hi Zu," a boy in a Trinity "Rose" hoodie waves to me from across the pool. "You made it just in time."

He takes off his shoes, stepping over the edge of the pool. But instead of falling in the water, his feet bounce lightly along the surface.

He takes several steps, miraculously.

"Emir boosted the tensile strength," Hermes turns to me. "You could float an elephant in the pool."

Emir walks toward us, hands outstretched.

"I come in peace," he jokes.

ZU X ORI

"It's all about cohesion," says another girl, holding a large remote controller. "We make the water love itself more—by strengthening the bonds," she says. "We can also weaken them," she teases Emir.

She pushes a button on the controller, plunging Emir into the pool.

Everyone laughs.

Ori stands beside me closely. I am enjoying this new world I'm being introduced to.

Someone is calling me.

"Oh—it's my dad," I look at my phone. "I'll just be a minute," I tell Orion.

I'm actually glad to hear from him.

"Hi dad," I step away from the pool.

As soon as he starts speaking, I realize how much I've changed. It's only been two days, but I'm not relating to him in the same way I usually do. He's asking me about the accident, of course.

It feels like years since we spoke.

"No, I'm fine dad," I assure him, trying to sound as normal as possible. "Everything's really good, great actually. I'm making new friends."

I TRUSTED YOU

It feels good to say that.

I drift further from the pool, heading back up to the patio, toward a row of tables.

“Well, it’s mostly one new friend,” I sit at a table. “We have a really deep—” I’m struggling to describe it, “um yeah, he’s a boy.”

I lean back in my chair.

Ori appears with a plate of lemon pie. He sits down briefly, forks up a bite, then wipes his mouth with a napkin, leaving me to my dad.

I mention Ori to my dad.

“Yes,” I say, “like the constellation.”

Usually I can tell my dad anything, but I’m not ready to talk about Orion. And certainly not my memories. Still, his voice brings back a sense of normalcy. “Dad, I’ll send you a photo of him, okay? Yes, I love you, too.”

I tap off the call, feeling conflicted.

I return my phone to my pocket, bumping my fingers on the glass vial of Nepenthe.

I shut my eyes.

I can’t escape this, no matter how I try.

ZU X ORI

Below, Ori and his friends are by the pool. The patio where I'm sitting is empty.

No one else is nearby.

Nervously I place Nepenthe on the table—at a safe distance. It's the first time I've truly examined it. The glass vial is thin and perfectly smooth, but there's no marking on the glass. It has a clear glass lid, which I don't dare to touch. Inside is a hazy green liquid, which transfixes me, even as I stare.

I look up at the brick mansion from my vision. Then at the green vial of Nepenthe. What I thought was crazy has become my reality.

I take out my phone again.

Quickly I find a drawing of the sharp-featured, angry looking boy. I don't want to admit it, but it's obvious the face I've drawn is Tai.

His black eyes glare at mine.

I glare back.

His features feel out-of-time. I feel how Tai grips my heart and won't let go. In my sketch, there's a pain in his eyes I haven't seen in real life.

I TRUSTED YOU

On the table is Ori's plate of lemon pie and the empty chair he was sitting in. It's a reminder of losing him. I look from the empty chair to the vial of Nepenthe, and then to my drawing of Tai.

I can't ignore this anymore.

I have to deal with it.

Maybe it's all a hoax. Just because Tai told me a story—and gave me a perfume bottle—doesn't prove anything. Even if somehow I drew him. Who knows, it could be broccoli juice inside the vial.

Or anything, or nothing.

Or poison.

Okay, I take a breath. Let's be smart about this.

Think this through.

Let's start from the beginning. Nepenthe is real. We saw the advertisement in the park with Lauren. That proves it's a real perfume. Okay. But does it make people forget? More to the point, would it make Ori forget our past together? There's no proof of that.

And who is Tai anyway?

ZU X ORI

What if he's an imposter? What if he's not even a Capulet? What if he has nothing to do with Nepenthe? Just a prankster.

Then how did he know about Orion and me? No one could have known that.

How did he know?

I stare intensely at the green liquid.

With my fingers, I roll the glass gently, like a genie's lamp. It feels strangely comforting. I tilt the vial sideways, watching the liquid move.

Could it actually be a poison? But it's a perfume, not poison, right? I'm staring at Ori's unfurled napkin. The one he used to wipe the corner of his mouth. Why am I staring at the napkin?

I feel on the verge of nausea.

I need to tell Ori about this.

Honesty is the key to our connection. All I have to do is tell Ori about Nepenthe. We'll work this out together.

That's what I'll do.

But what if he reacts?

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The power of my vision confronts me. I can't ignore what I saw. And what I saw—undeniably—was Ori lying dead. It was as clear as day.

I feel a trembling in my body.

I have to protect Ori.

I'm staring at his empty chair. If it's not poison, then what's the big deal? Put a drop in Ori's napkin, where he can smell it. It won't matter either way. At least I can say I tried to save him.

Put a drop in his napkin?

Am I listening to myself?

I feel totally confused and scared. What is happening? So much was easier before any of this began. Before I remembered my past.

Maybe oblivion *is* bliss.

I tell myself to keep calm. If it's broccoli juice, then it's no problem. The joke's on me.

Yeah, ha ha.

But what if it's poison?

Then I just killed the love of my life. I shut my eyes, shuddering inside. But could it *really* be poison? That would mean Tai is a psychopath (probably) and wants Ori dead

ZU X ORI

(maybe). Tai didn't seem to like Orion very much. Maybe he *does* want Orion dead. This would be an easy way to do it.

I feel a chill race up my spine.

Am I about to kill Ori?

I grip Nepenthe between my thumb and forefinger, gazing into its green depth. All I see is the black storm and Ori lying dead, alongside my memories of him in the Capulet tomb.

They seem like the same thing.

What if Tai is right?

What if I do nothing—and somehow Ori dies?

As much as I hate it, everything Tai said was true. He even knew about my hyperosmia and how I'm melancholy. How could he know that? Those are things my friends don't even know about me. What's worse is what I feel in my bones: *Tai is telling the truth.*

What I saw was real.

Orion is destined to die.

I have to ask myself: If it means saving Ori's life, could I live without him? Could I?

That would be the ultimate sacrifice, wouldn't it?

Could I do that for him?

I TRUSTED YOU

Could I?



ORI

Hermes is talking to me by the pool. But I'm growing distracted. I glance around for Zu. How long has she been on the phone?

Something isn't right.

She's been gone too long.

Angelo is asking about my health, describing the flu he had last year. But I can't pay attention, his voice keeps fading in and out.

Something's wrong.

I need to find Zu.

I feel it as an absolute certainty. Something is wrong. Something terrible is about to happen. All I can think is: *I need to find Zu.*

Now.

Everyone is talking to me.

ZU X ORI

There's no opening to break away. Wen is telling me about her summer job, working in London. I nod and respond. What am I still doing here?

I hear a voice: *Ori, now. Go!*

"Excuse me—" I interrupt Wen.

"Oh, sure," she seems surprised.

I leave the pool, heading up the patio stairs. My steps are measured, almost careful.

But inside, I'm already running.



ZU

Ori's white napkin lies on the table. His slice of lemon pie sits on the plate.

I stare at Ori's empty chair.

I'm trapped by the thoughts I'm having. Wasn't this supposed to be our time together? But all I'm thinking about is the Capulet tomb.

I never want that to happen again.

Anything is better than that.

I'm staring at the napkin.

I TRUSTED YOU

A drop, somewhere on the napkin. When Ori returns, he'll wipe the corner of his lovely mouth. It will be done. Ori will be saved.

I feel twisted inside.

If you think love is without temptation. That love means everything is easy.

Think again.

Maybe love means making a choice to love, no matter how hard the choice. Maybe love is a test, which we only win by loving.

But what does that mean now?

Let me love Ori.

I reach for the green vial of Nepenthe. Slowly I lift the clear glass lid. It opens smoothly, but I stop halfway. I can still turn back.

I can change my mind.



ORI

I've almost reached the table.

I can see Zu from afar.

ZU X ORI

She looks so lovely. Her beautiful hair, her green shirt, even the way she's sitting. I feel so silly for being concerned.

I was a fool to worry.

A wave of relief comes over me.

I can feel I've actually missed her, even in these few moments. She's peering intently at something in her hands. She seems mesmerized and doesn't see me approaching. In her hands is a green vial.

Zu startles, as I sit down.

"What's that?" I say.



ZU

I feel Ori's question, like a shock.

I flip the lid closed, covering the vial. I realize it looks like I'm guilty of something. But it's too late to hide. Ori's stare is a combination of curiosity, bewilderment and suspicion.

"What *is* that?" he says again.

I panic. I can't answer.

I TRUSTED YOU

There is a long, deathly pause. My eyes are locked on Ori. I want to speak. But my mouth won't tell a lie, and I no longer know what's true. So I sit there, my heart on fire, looking like a deer in the headlights.

"Zu!" says my love.

I am shocked into speech.

"It's something Tai gave me," I blurt the truth. "It's Nepenthe, I think." There. Now I've told the truth, no matter what happens.

I feel my chest and hands relax.

"Tai?" says Ori.

He perches along the edge of his chair, his body language guarded. "What for?"

"Nothing—" I say instinctively.

I shut my eyes, ashamed. "To make you forget me," I correct myself.

"What?"

Ori retracts, like a wounded animal.

"Tai said the only way to save you—" I speak rapidly, "from dying—is to make you forget me. Forget our past. Forget Verona."

"And you were going to?" Ori's face is anguished.

ZU X ORI

"No!" I say quickly. "I—hadn't decided."

"You hadn't decided?"

Oh no—anything but this.

Ori looks tortured by my every word. I want to press stop. I want to rewind to fifteen minutes ago, rewind to laughing in Central Park, rewind to kissing on the High Line. But I can't rewind.

All I can do is tell the truth.

"I couldn't risk letting you die," I say.

Ori doesn't know how to respond. "So you were going to let *us* die," he replies.

I sit stone-like in my chair. I feel like Ori is against me. Our togetherness is evaporating, as we debate. It's one word against another.

"I wasn't going to do it—" I try to explain.

"Really?"

"I hadn't decided."

"Oh my God, Zu," Ori says again.

"I couldn't let you die—again."

"Why not?" he says. "What's more important than love?"

"Your life?" I say.

I TRUSTED YOU

"Is it?" Ori replies.

I feel the truth of his words. I feel Ori is throwing me a lifeline—to our love, to us. In Verona we died—not to save each other—but because we loved each other. I feel so grateful to be here with Ori.

"I thought I knew you," he says, warily.

What?!

No, no, no.

"You do," I plead.

"No, no," he shakes his head.

The impossible is happening. I feel like I'm losing Orion. I reach out for his hand across the table. "Ori, look at me," I gaze into his eyes. "You know me—it's me. I was scared. I didn't know what to—"

"No," he withdraws his hand.

"Ori—" I say with presence.

He won't look at me. He's withdrawing.

"You're different," he says. "Something's happened, you've changed. I *trusted* you."

"You can still trust me."

ZU X ORI

Ori looks at me, in a way I've never seen. It's unfeeling, closed. I no longer know what he's thinking.

"I have to go—" he says abruptly.

"Go?"

He pushes back his chair, getting up. He's actually leaving! I'm somewhere between total panic and denial. But now I know.

This is worse than the tomb.

"Wait, Ori—" I say.

I can't let him leave.

I'm following after him. Ori walks quickly ahead of me. I hurry just to keep up. I feel I'm chasing after him, which makes it even worse.

We pass through the rooms of the red-brick building. Ori is nearing the front door, so I speed up. I catch him outside the entrance.

I grab his arm.

"Let go—" he says.

"Listen to me," I am almost shouting.

I don't let go. But I can't reach him. "Leave me alone," he says painfully.

I TRUSTED YOU

He pulls his arm back, violently. I hold my grip and stare ferociously into his eyes. "I didn't *do* anything—" I say desperately.

Ori breaks away from me.

I take a few steps after him, then stop.

I stand outside the brick building. I watch Ori running into the darkness, under the streetlamps.

"Ori—" I call once more.



ORI

I hear Zu calling after me.

Every time I hear my name, I run faster. I run down the tree-lined street, colliding into a bicyclist. The bicyclist falls over, shouting at me.

I scramble away.

So I can't hear Zu's voice.

So I can't hear her say my name. I don't know where I'm going.

Just away.

Away from Zu.

ZU X ORI

I rush into the park across the street, past flowerbeds and benches. I hear my footsteps running. There are people there, so I dash into the trees, the branches scratching my face and arms. I take a turn, slipping on leaves and tumbling into the dirt.

I spring up on my feet.

The moonlight is breaking through the treetops.

I feel safer here. Safer from Zu. From the person I trusted more than anyone in the world.

How is this happening?

I'm catching my breath. Was Zu really going to use that green perfume?

Yes.

She said so.

I see her sitting at the table. Gazing into that green vial. Then caught, like a criminal. Her guilty conscience. And all her excuses!

If only she'd been honest!

How long was she planning this?

Trusting Tai more than me.

Trusting a Capulet.

I TRUSTED YOU

I've *never* not trusted Zu. From our first Verona night, she's been my brightest star. Ahead of me is a gravel path in the moonlight.

I feel my future has run out.

I start to run again, my shoes scraping along the gravel, my heart in flames. I keep running in the same direction, away from Zu.

Suddenly New York City disappears.

The sky is bright as day, and I'm running on a dirt, country road.

What?!

Immediately my legs stop running. The midday sun is blazing above me. I'm sweating and there's dirt caked on my shoes. My arms and face are sunburned. My feet are sore and blistered from walking.

How is this possible?

It's no longer nighttime. It's no longer New York City. It's no longer *now*.

It's *then*.

I stare across the dusty plains. Everything is scorched in the midday heat. The slow rolling hills are golden brown, with wheat fields as far as I can see. A stray crow flies

ZU X ORI

overhead. Sweat is dripping from my forehead, falling onto the barren road.

I wipe my brow, examining the sweat.

I know exactly where I am.

This is Italy, five hundred years ago. I've been banished from Verona after killing Tybalt. Now I'm on the road to Mantua, a nearby town. It's a new memory, one I haven't seen before.

I'm in another time crossing.

Everything I care about is behind me. In Verona. With Juliet. There's nothing but brown road ahead. I'm tired, my head is heavy. I don't want to go to Mantua.

But I don't have a choice.

I don't want to leave Juliet. But I have. Everything I care about is behind me.

It's exactly how I feel now.

Is this how a time crossing happens? A similar feeling that bridges lives? Right now, my Verona and New York lives are intertwined. Like a simulation. But it's all happening inside me.

The next moment, the sunlight disappears.

I TRUSTED YOU

I'm back in New York, on the gravel path. The moonlight shines through the trees. I'm not sweating at all, and my feet are no longer sore. I rapidly pat my chest and thighs, making sure I am real. Not far away, I hear New Yorkers talking and walking.

Yes, I'm back.

But I'm also different.

Being on the Mantua road has changed me. I can see the past more clearly. Leaving Juliet in Verona was a disaster.

Within days, we were both dead.

Am I repeating the same mistake?

Is this what Lauren meant by repetition? The second law of reincarnation. About escaping our patterns, learning from our past. Back in Verona, I was banished.

I didn't have a choice.

But I do now.

I look in the direction of Hermes' house.

For a split second, I'm back on the Mantua road. The crow flies overhead, circling the wheat fields. Under the sun-baked sky, I look longingly back to Verona.

This time, I take a step toward it.

ZU X ORI

I'm choosing a different path.

New York reappears. My feet retrace the gravel path through the park. Back toward the Wright mansion. My steps begin slowly.

Then faster.

Somehow every second counts now.

I race back to the brick mansion.

Hermes' house is dead ahead. Its brick facade and windows light the night. Zu could still be inside. I haven't been gone for long.

Or have I?

How stupid was I to leave?

I hurry up the stairs, then inside. I return to the patio, arriving at the stone table.

There's no one there.

Where Zu was sitting, there's only an empty chair. My lemon pie and fork are still on the plate. My napkin lies unfurled on the table.

I whirl around, searching the house.

Could she still be here? Maybe in the bathroom, or maybe outside? Or with Hermes and the others. I scan the pool and garden again.

I TRUSTED YOU

But there's no Zu.

I don't see her anywhere.

I hurry through the rooms of the house, from one to another. It feels like a house of strangers, everyone is laughing and talking.

I head out the front entrance.

"Orion—"

I turn around. It's Wen.

"Where's Zu?" I rush toward her.

"She left."

"Where did she go?"

"I don't know," Wen seems concerned. "She wouldn't say a thing. Is everything okay?"

"Which direction?" I demand.

Wen shakes her head, she points up the street. In the far distance is the green sign of Nepenthe.



ZU

I leave right after Orion.

ZU X ORI

After pacing in a circle about three times, debating what to do. Should I chase after him? Slow down, and think things through?

Or give up on the rest of my life?

I've just lost my rudder.

Two days ago, my life took a turn toward incredible. And now I'm lost. I snatch up Nepenthe, stumble past Wen and leave the brick building behind.

I don't have a plan.

But I can't shrug this off.

When Orion and I are together, the stars and planets are aligned. Nothing becomes something. The universe has a reason, and there's harmony to the world. Arguing with Orion isn't just a quarrel.

It's a cosmic split.

Do you understand what I mean?

With Orion, the world is right. And what's happening now is wrong. It's the universe going in reverse direction, cats barking and dogs meowing, the leaves falling in spring.

This won't be easy to fix.

A broken trust doesn't repair itself. When you sing out of tune, you ruin the song. That's why Ori reacted. On some

I TRUSTED YOU

deep level, I think he understood this. Our relationship is about truth.

Lovers never lie.

And I lied. Because I was scared. But still I lied. And now I'm paying the price.

When I went back in the grass.

For Nepenthe. That was my mistake. I knew it was wrong and I could have kept walking. But I went back anyway.

I chose fear, instead of truth.

The safe thing would be to see Lauren now. That was the plan. But there's no more plan.

And I can't do the safe thing.

Not anymore.

Anyway, what's the point? Without Orion? I lower my head, turning the corner from Hermes' house. A dozen blocks ahead of me, the green Nepenthe display glares above the Capulet store.

It shines like an ugly, green beacon.

I look down at Ori's strand of red yarn, encircled on my wrist. I feel it burning in my heart.

I know what I have to do.

ZU X ORI

But I don't want to.



ORI

I know where Zu is going.

I leave Wen, calling Zu's phone. But it goes straight to voicemail. I'm two blocks up the street, when a cab comes up behind me.

I step in front, stopping it.

I'm aware of a strange, new sensation. It's the power of nothing to lose.

The cabbie is staring at me.

"You alright, kid?" he says.

"Never better," I say.

The cabbie looks over my clothes. What does he care how I dress? Then I notice my pant legs, streaked in dirt. My hands are scraped and dirty.

I'm lucky he even stopped.

We drive toward the green Nepenthe ad. I watch it growing closer. I'm furious with myself—and Zu, and

I TRUSTED YOU

everyone—for what has happened. But reliving the Mantua road has changed everything.

I'm not running away this time.

We're almost there.

With every block, the green Nepenthe display looms larger, more menacing. I look to the side, catching a flash of purple through the window. I whip my head, turning around. Could it be?

Is that Zu?

"Stop here—" I tell the driver.

"Here?"

"Now—" I shout.

I step out into the street.

The cars behind brake sharply, avoiding me. I'm in their headlights, hearing their horns. But I don't care. I step toward the sidewalk, searching where I saw the flash of purple. I'm looking up and down, through the dense New York night. The people pass and the crowd dissolves in front of me.

But there's no Zu.

I stand in the street. The traffic piles up behind me, the headlights glaring. Above me is the giant display for

ZU X ORI

Nepenthe, its green liquid glowing from inside an oversized bottle.

I take a long look.

That's what Zu had in her pocket?

It feels downright evil. I feel Nepenthe mocking me, coloring my world with its hazy green hue. The car horns behind me blare.

"Hey, kid," the cabbie leans out the window, "are you crazy?"

I get back inside the cab.

"Who you looking for?" he says.

"Juliet," I tell him.

"Aren't we all, buddy?" he says. "Aren't we all."

I sink down into the backseat, as we travel the last blocks to the Capulet store. The gauzy green of Nepenthe coats the pavement of the intersection.

I'm about to jump out, when my phone rings. I answer on the first tone.

"Ori, I need to talk to you—"

It's Hermes.

I've never been so disappointed to hear from him.

I TRUSTED YOU

"Not now," I say.

"Yes now," he says.

"NOT NOW."

"Orion," Hermes says.

I pause.

Hermes never uses my full name.

"I need you to listen to me," he says gently. "As your friend, I need you to listen."

I wait silently.

Outside the cab, the Capulet store drifts by. I watch it from the window. "I need you to come back," says Hermes. "Come back to the house."

"You don't know what's happening!"

"No, I *do* know."

What is he talking about?

"And I need you to come back."

"Hermes, you don't understand," I tell him. "I can't turn away from this."

"Yes you can," says Hermes. "I understand. Trust me, I understand." The cab drives on, aimlessly. We are leaving the Capulet store behind.

ZU X ORI

“Orion,” Hermes says earnestly. “As your friend, have I ever let you down? For real.”

I look out the window.

“This is important,” he says.

I stare down, ending the call.

The black screen stares back. Everything is telling me I need to find Zu. But Hermes is telling me something else. And I trust my friend.

I am torn in two.

“Turn around,” I tell the cabbie.



ZU

I thought I saw Orion.

For just a second, through the traffic. My heart leaped and then the person disappeared. I guess it was my mind, playing tricks on me.

I cross a green-hued intersection, outside the Capulet storefront. Something is different about me. It's like someone else is in charge. The crowd seems to part and flow around me. I gaze directly ahead, single-minded, without wavering.

I TRUSTED YOU

Outside the all-glass building, I look up.

The glass walls rise three stories high. I stand there in the breezy, humid night. Inside I can see the guests at the reception.

Now what?

I'm not sure.

But I have something to settle. Two empty wine bottles are standing by the curb. I grab one by the neck. It feels heavy in my hand.

I hurl it immediately at the glass.

It slams against the door, smashing the bottle into pieces. But the door stands intact, with only a thin, winding crack in the glass.

I stand outside, fists clenched.

Someone arrives rapidly at the door. I can't see who they are, until the door swings open.

It's Tai.

I didn't think he'd actually be here.

Behind him is a packed room of guests. Tai steps outside carefully, observing the crack in the door with amazement.

He smiles proudly at me.

ZU X ORI

"Not bad," he says.

I throw the second bottle at his head.

Tai catches it in midair. He spins it to read the wine label, putting on impressed airs.

What an asshole.

I don't know my next move. I just start walking toward him. I don't know what Tai wants from me. But I want to get to the bottom of this.

"No Orion?" Tai observes.

He sets down the wine bottle.

I'm not afraid of Tai anymore. I walk straight up and take a swing at his head. My fist connects with his face. Tai bends downward, to the side. He doesn't seem hurt. But that felt really good. For everything that he's done.

"Welcome home," says Tai, recovering.

He turns his back to me and walks inside. "Come on, Zu. I have something to show you."

I have no response. But I follow.

In the low white ambience, the Capulet store is a cross between a royal palace and a mausoleum. From end to end are the most elegant-looking people in the brightest and boldest fashions. They smile pleasantly at me, as I pass. The

I TRUSTED YOU

whole place feels so beautifully decadent, like a futuristic garden of Eden.

I kind of love it.

But it's definitely not me.

Tai shoots me a mischievous wink. I pause momentarily. The door is still open behind me.

I could always leave.

But there's something I need to know.

Tai ascends a spiraling staircase. From behind him, I observe how his fist clenches, opening and closing again, as if he's in pain. Something about this gesture feels familiar. At the top of the stairs, I meet Lucrezia who wears a pretty white dress.

She gives me a warm, sisterly smile.

A frosted double door opens, and Tai and Lucrezia enter. I follow them across the threshold.

The doors close behind me.



EPISODE 8 **TWO HOUSES ALIKE**

DELPHINE

Paris is in chaos.

Smoke wafts over the narrow streets. I run, along with the others, from the other end of the avenue. The king's soldiers are closing in, shouting at us. Our way is blocked by the barricades.

I hear shots over my head.

I TRUSTED YOU

To my right is a doorway. I jam against it, but I can't open it. Stenciled on the shop window are the words *Des Arbres* and a white tree.

The soldiers are proceeding closer.

I thrust my shoulder, with all my weight. On the third try, the door breaks open, unexpectedly.

I fall inwards, onto the floor.

My pistol tumbles across the shop.

I look upward, from the floor. I am inside a furniture shop. Across the room is a young, blond-haired woman, holding my pistol.

I stand up, defiantly.

"Give me that," I demand.

"Close the door."

The gunfire outside is nearing.

I turn quickly, forcing the wooden door back in place. I sweep my long, red-brown hair away from my face.

"Now give me my pistol."

"Why, is it yours?" says the woman.

ZU X ORI

She appears several years older than me, probably in her mid-twenties. She wears the comfortable brown dress of a shop merchant.

"Yes, it is," I lie. "To defend the nation."

I step forward aggressively, until the blond woman raises the pistol.

"You won't shoot me," I defy her.

"You don't think so?"

Something in her tone makes me stop. Or perhaps, it is the deadly calm look in her blue eyes. There is something different about her.

"What is your name?"

"Delphine," I say, proudly.

The young, blond woman crosses the room, opening a drawer in a heavy cabinet. She places the pistol inside, locking it with a key.

I barely contain my rage.

"Be a villain, then," I say. "When they kill our sisters in the streets, you'll be to blame."

"Well, there's the door," she says.

Outside the soldiers are interrogating some of my friends in the street. "Perhaps I can stay," I temper my voice,

I TRUSTED YOU

"a little longer." I've been kicked out my parent's house, and I actually have nowhere to go. But I don't say this.

The blond woman smiles.

"I am trustworthy," I assure her.

She looks at me, piercingly. "Well, you can do some sweeping." She hands me a broom.

I take it, reluctantly.

"And your name?" I ask.

"Tabithe."



I stay with Tabithe that night.

I remain awake, until I hear Tabithe sleeping. I go quietly to the cabinet. Carelessly, Tabithe has left the brass key lying on a nearby table. I open the locked drawer, retrieving my pistol.

I find Tabithe in her bedroom.

I point the pistol at her face, as she opens her eyes.

"You won't shoot me," she says.

"How do you know?" I dare her.

Her blue eyes regard me.

ZU X ORI

“Because, Delphine,” she says kindly, “you are a good person, at heart. And you care about people, even if you can’t always show it. And it would only add to the pain you already feel, every day.”

I break down, sobbing.



Tabithe allows me to remain with her.

We agree I can stay for one month. In return, I will help with her furniture shop. I don’t know why she would offer this, but I don’t care. Considering my parents won’t speak with me, the summer is sweltering and I don’t have much money, I consider this a good deal.

I agree to give up the pistol, as insurance I won’t join in any more demonstrations. Well, why not?

It’s not so bad.

I grow to like Tabithe, even though she makes me work all day. And won’t answer half my questions. After a while, Tabithe has me greet her customers.

I’m even learning about furniture. Ha!

Tabithe and I have dinners together.

I TRUSTED YOU

She's always asking me questions I don't like to answer. Or don't know how to answer. About myself or my family—or why I am angry. And when I *do* answer, she'll often just look at me.

With those beautiful, clear blue eyes.

She makes me curious about myself.

In a way I haven't been.

We are changing a sofa upholstery, one afternoon, when I ask: "So, why do *you* think I am defiant?"

Tabithe drops her tools, looking at me.

"Let's find out," she smiles.

Mysteriously.



We enter a room at the end of the hall. Through a doorway I barely knew was there. Inside is a small room, with a dusty skylight, but no windows.

Tabithe sits on the floor, her dress spread around her. "Sit across from me," she motions.

I sit down.

"A bit closer," she says.

ZU X ORI

I inch forward, until I am within arms reach of Tabithe. Her beautiful blond hair falls below her shoulders. Her blue eyes smile at me.

"I'm going to ask you a few questions," she says.

Oh, I've heard this before!

Tabithe smiles.

"But this time," she says, "you don't have to answer. You just need to feel—whatever you feel."

I am already uncomfortable.

"Okay," I agree.

Tabithe looks to the door.

"Ah," she observes, "you must close the door." I can't see why. We are the only ones in the shop. Tabithe motions again to the door. I cross the room.

"This is not for everyone," she says.

I shut the door.



A blue light is filling the room.

Tabithe smiles softly, raising her left palm. "Now is the fun part," she says quietly.

I TRUSTED YOU

From above the skylight, the blue light descends. The room seems to disappear. Or, I disappear from it. I am aware of being in another time, or another place. I am another person, but it is also me.

I am running.

The sun is sharply overhead.

I am larger and stronger, male. But just as confident in myself. And I am armed. But with a sword, not a pistol.

Around me are others, with swords.

We are in a sandy square, bright with sunlight on the buildings. I am bursting with anger. My friend tries to calm me, but a spearing pain ruptures my side.

I collapse.

Angrily, I raise myself. With my last breath, I shout: "*A plague on both your houses!*"

My death has arrived.

Only the blue light remains.



It's a beautiful mid-July morning.

ZU X ORI

Tabithe and I step out of the shop entrance, into the bright cobblestone street. People passing by wear red and blue ribbons, the colors of the revolution.

Tabithe holds my arm, tenderly.

She hands me the pistol.

"As we agreed," she says.

I am no longer the same furious girl, who broke down Tabithe's door. I've seen too much about myself, behind the closed door of the skylight room.

I am different.

"You have helped me," I say.

It's the understatement of my life. But I don't have any other words.

"In the future," Tabithe says, "you will have the chance to help someone too. To re-introduce them. The way I introduced you."

She sounds so specific.

"Who?" I ask.

"A friend," says Tabithe, simply.

I've learned to accept her mysterious answers.

I TRUSTED YOU

We hear drums in the distance. There is an excitement in the air today. The militia is drawing through the streets, heading for the city center.

"What now?" I say.

"That's up to you."

I look into Tabithe's eternally blue eyes. I kiss her on the cheeks. Then I join the growing crowd, marching toward the demonstrations. I can't see my eyes. But I feel them blazing, calm and clear.



ORI

I've returned to the Wright mansion.

Outside Hermes is waiting for me. The tree-lined avenue is ghostly quiet, as I approach my friend at the top of the entrance stairs.

His eyes are blazing, calm and clear.

"Where is everyone?" I say.

"I sent them home."

"Why?"

ZU X ORI

Hermes stares at me, deeply. His eyes gaze toward me differently, more sharply. "There's something I want to show you, Ori," he says.



ZU

I follow Tai into the perfume lab.

The room takes my breath away. It's a cube shaped space, where the walls are covered in soft white light. The room seems to glow from within.

Brightly colored perfume bottles adorn the tables. The glass bottles are round, oblong and dozens of even stranger shapes.

I take a curious step forward.

Surprisingly, I don't smell a thing. I guess all the fragrance is trapped inside the bottles.

Lucrezia comes up beside me.

"Perfume has always been part of life," she guides me toward a table of antique perfume bottles. "Even these bottles have a history."

She points to the bottle stoppers, ornately shaped as flowers, shells and animals. "This one," Lucrezia draws my

I TRUSTED YOU

attention to a dagger-like stopper, “was even used in the murder of a famous Italian noblewoman, sent to her death by a jealous lover.”

She ushers me toward another table. On its surface are modern-looking vials.

“Do you want to try?” Tai asks.

I wrinkle my mouth, as if indifferent. I’m reminded how little I trust either of them. But at the same time, I *am* impressed being here. Lucrezia directs me toward a bottle filled with a light purple liquid.

She places her hand on the lid.

“This is Evangeline,” she says.

Lucrezia smiles, lifting the glass lid. She gently takes hold of my wrist. I debate whether I should pull away. How do I know it isn’t dangerous?

I don’t. But I don’t care.

The lab, the perfumes, whatever the purple Evangeline is. It’s all too captivating.

A spray of purple mist moistens my wrist. Lucrezia nudges my hand toward my nose. For a long second or two, I hold my breath.

Then I inhale.

ZU X ORI

Oh, my goodness.

I've never smelled anything like this.

It's not just an aroma. It's an all-senses experience. I feel like I've awakened in a luscious garden, with growing plants and blossoms all around me. I feel like I *am* the garden. Around me, light purple bubbles, shapes and insects float through the air.

I can't tell if they're real.

Or not.

This isn't a fragrance. It's an explosion of life.

"Now tell us, Zu," I hear Tai's voice. "What are the main ingredients of Evangeline?" My first reaction is: *I have no clue*. I'm just floating in the purple garden, absorbed by the earthy scents of living things.

Gradually I focus my attention. "Jasmine," I mumble, "cinnamon. And cedar."

Tai breaks into a beautiful grin.

"You see," he says, "you were born for this!" It's the happiest I've seen him. "You left out orange blossom, but that's okay."

Strangely, I feel happy too.

I smile, then instantly wish I hadn't.

ITRUSTED YOU

As if I've admitted something about myself. But I *am* feeling more comfortable. Tai and Lucrezia seem to understand a part of me that so few people do. Certainly not my parents, and maybe not even Orion.

I allow myself an unpleasant thought.

Is it possible that Tai and Lucrezia are at least partly right? Is it possible I passed up another future? When I chose Romeo in Verona.

What if I hadn't met Romeo?

Or at least not fallen madly in love with him? If that's even possible! But maybe, somehow, it was. If I had returned to my chamber, instead of accompanying my father in greeting the guests at the Capulet ball. I might not have bumped into Romeo. Our meeting was a matter of moments, of inches.

Of seconds.

Maybe I would have remained with the Capulets, helping them develop their perfumes. Maybe I would have helped people remember their past.

Maybe I would have lived.

This alternate possibility shakes me. It's like another life that I could have lived. But then, there wouldn't have been

ZU X ORI

Romeo. There wouldn't have been our love. That incredible, life-shattering love.

There wouldn't have been us.

I'm realizing the power of choices.

For the first time.



ORI

Hermes crosses the large entryway, without looking back. As if expecting I will follow.

"Wait—what's going on?" I stand there. "I came all the way back here."

Hermes looks back.

"Come and see," he says.

In the darkened light of the mansion, he approaches a stone stairway, leading toward the basement. I follow a few steps behind.

We descend the stone stairway.

I've never seen this part of the building. "When we first moved here," Hermes tells me, "I used to go down here. It was my hiding spot."

I TRUSTED YOU

Directly ahead of us, at the base of the stairs, is an imposing stone wall. As if the stairs led to nowhere. We've reached a dead end.

Hermes extends his hand.

His fingertips are about to reach the wall, when the stones ripple away from his hand. His fingers pass straight through the stone.

It's another hologram.

Of course.

"This was my first one," Hermes grins broadly, stepping through the rippling wall. I'm left standing by myself, at the base of the stairs.

I inch my fingers forward.

Again the stones seem to shimmer. Soon my hand and elbow are immersed in the wall.

Hermes drags me through.

I'm in a large room, with a long hallway extending into the distance. The walls are built entirely of stone. "This is the original basement," Hermes says. "When I found it, it was all walled up." He laughs, "With real stones."

"Why are we here?"

"Look below your feet," he says.

ZU X ORI

I step backward gingerly. I notice a large engraving on the stone floor, a simple carving of a tree. "Look familiar?" Hermes smiles.

I observe the engraved branches.

It does seem familiar.

Like something I've seen before. "This is the Montague emblem," Hermes tells me.

Oh.

Wait.

"It's no hologram, Ori—"

Hermes steps forward, seeing my face.

"There was a time," Hermes says bluntly, "when the Montagues were a family. But we've evolved beyond the bloodline."

"We?" I say.

How does Hermes know my past? Was he listening to my conversation with Zu? On the patio?

"You're a Montague," I play along.

"As much as you, Ori."

I'm in no mood for jokes.

"I wouldn't kid you," Hermes says.

I TRUSTED YOU

"Yes you would."

"Not on this."

He steps up the stone hallway.

Two rows of holographic figures rush toward us, along the length of the hall. They stand at intervals, spanning the entire stone hallway. "Throughout history, the Montagues have gone by different names in different places," Hermes says. "But it's no longer your name that makes you a Montague, it's what's in your heart."

We walk between the rows.

It's a virtual timeline to the past.

I see a woman in a Victorian dress and a man in a bowler hat. Hermes gazes at the figures, who turn their heads, staring back. "The Montagues were women and men," he says, "who shared a love for truth. Some were famous. But most worked behind the scenes."

I pass between the figures.

Two young women, one blond and one red-haired, stand in European dresses. Hermes pauses, glancing affectionately at the two women. "I wouldn't be showing you any of this," Hermes says. "But when you showed up with Zu tonight—well, I knew."

ZU X ORI

"Knew what?"

"You'd seen your past."

I stop at once.

How can Hermes know?

And why is he bringing up the Montagues? Here in New York City.

We pass holograms wearing the garments of medieval monks and nuns. Others wear traditional Indian and Asian clothing. Further back are Greeks, Persians and Africans. "These are Initiates of the Montague stream," Hermes says respectfully. "The Montague Initiates reincarnate, again and again."

The holographic row reorganizes.

All the figures dissolve, except for two. A man and woman. They zoom rapidly forward, stopping just before one another.

They face each other, curiously.

"This is Simon of Carthage," Hermes looks at each, "and Elizabeth of Hanover. They lived centuries apart. Both devoted their lives to the Montague ideals of freedom and truth. And both were the same person," says Hermes. "Simon was born again as Elizabeth."

I TRUSTED YOU

The two holograms peer keenly at each other, as if gazing into a mirror.

"In time, Elizabeth passed on as well. But don't worry," Hermes winks. "She'll be back."

The figures fade out.

Two others take their place.

From opposite ends of the hall, they speed forward to meet in front of us. One wears an Arabian keffiyeh, the other a modern dress shirt and fitted trousers. "Mamet Zayn," Hermes introduces me. "He fought against the forces of intolerance, many centuries ago. Now he develops renewable technologies." The modern incarnation has a blur over the face. "For reasons of privacy, I can't reveal their identity."

Hermes smiles at Mamet Zayn.

"Now, Ori—check this out," says Hermes.

From the end of the hallway, a lone figure approaches us, at a casual pace. It's a teenage boy, with flowing hair. He's dressed casually in the Italian Renaissance style.

I draw toward him, mesmerized, until we are face to face. His soft features regard me.

We examine each other, carefully.

ZU X ORI

This is me, I know.

In Verona.

"Welcome home, Ori," says Hermes.

Beside the hologram of Romeo Montague, another boy strides up brazenly. He is a bright star, smiling broadly. He looks at Hermes, who gazes back.

Shudders race through me.

I know this boy.

"*Mercutio*—" I say.

Of course.

"I wasn't a Montague then," Hermes bows his head. "But I was your friend."

My affection for Hermes spills over.

I had assumed my life was a journey I made on my own. Now I'm realizing I was never alone. My loved ones, my friends, were with me all along.

"As always," says Hermes.



ZU

Tai beckons me away from Evangeline.

ITRUSTED YOU

The purple insects and bubbles are still whirling around me. I eye them, as they dissolve in the air. "I want you to meet someone," he says.

Toward the back of the room is a ceramic table that seems to command the lab. I hadn't even noticed it, somehow. As Tai approaches, I see a ruby-colored light hovering over the table.

"Hello Zu," I hear a female-like voice.

"This is RITA," Lucrezia introduces me. "She's our advisor in the perfume arts."

"I've been waiting to meet you," says RITA. Her very human voice strikes me. I didn't know an artificial intelligence, if that's what RITA is, could wait.

But she sounds like she means it.

"Why?" I ask, carefully.

"I've heard so much," RITA says warmly, "about your special aptitude for fragrance and memory. Lucrezia and I have been working on a very special project. We're hoping you'll join us."

RITA seems to have her own personality. What's spooky is that I actually like her. I arrived angry and resentful. But now I'm interested.

ZU X ORI

I can't help it.

"The memory perfume," I say.



ORI

I watch another of Hermes' holograms.

It hovers like a large screen, moving forward as we move. Images of old Verona appear. "*Two households, both alike in dignity,*" says Hermes, quoting Shakespeare's opening line.

He nods in approval.

"Shakespeare knew how to start a story," says Hermes. "But he wasn't so precise in telling our tale. The Montagues and Capulets aren't just families in a play. The real story is more complex."

In the hologram, I see Verona's Piazza delle Erbe and townspeople in the marketplace.

"In those days," Hermes says, "your family was all-important to your future. The Bachs all became great musicians. The Medicis were the banker patrons of Europe. And the Capulets. Well, the Capulets understood the secrets of perfume."

I TRUSTED YOU

I gaze into the images.

Workers in Renaissance dress are busy in an old-fashioned perfume lab. Peculiar bottles and metal vats occupy the room.

“For centuries, the Capulets were the masters of fragrance. But successes made them proud,” says Hermes. “They began to think they were superior. And in a way, they were! To remember your past life, you needed their perfume.”

“Wait—” I say. “The past-life perfume was real?”

“Unfortunately.”

“How do you know?”

Hermes looks at me, ironically.

“We helped them,” he says.



ZU

Lucrezia looks at me, earnestly.

“It’s been a challenging project,” she admits. “But we believe you can help us.”

She has an honesty I can’t deny.

ZU X ORI

"Perfume can be healing," Lucrezia tells me. She gestures around the lab. "What you felt with Evangeline is just one example. Imagine if we could help people unlock their past lives, Zu."

"But why use a perfume?"

I feel skeptical, yet drawn in.

"Most people can't remember their past," Lucrezia says. "The memories are too deep, too buried. But what if we made it easier, with a perfume?"



ORI

"Helped them?" I repeat.

"Crazy, I know," says Hermes. "But to make perfume, you need flowers, bark and seeds. The Montagues always understood the secrets of nature. Why do you think the emblem is a tree? At the time, the Montagues grew fragrant plants—like jasmine, orange and rose."

The hologram changes to a scene of rolling hills and fields. Workers in simple clothing harvest flowers, under a shining sun.

"But weren't the families enemies?" I backtrack.

I TRUSTED YOU

"Everyone thinks so," Hermes laughs.

He shakes his head. "All because of Shakespeare! He didn't even know us! He wrote his play based on a story he overheard in a tavern in Spain! The Montagues and Capulets were partners," Hermes explains. "In fact, the trouble only started around the time you and Juliet were born in Verona."

I watch Hermes, curiously wondering how Mercutio became this person. They each feel very different, but also the same.

"The Capulets were testing their past life perfume," Hermes says simply. "But it was just too dangerous. They ignored our warnings. Finally we stopped supplying them! This led to the worst feuding, brawls breaking out in the streets of Verona."

I see two bands of townspeople, fighting desperately in the piazza. "Why was it dangerous?" I am absorbed.

Hermes pauses, gazing at me.

"Ori, as you know," he says, "past lives are traumatic! Your most devastating memories—everything you want to forget—come rushing back. If you're not ready for this—and most people aren't—it's honestly dangerous. Especially if you accelerate the process with a perfume! The Capulets

ZU X ORI

were having horrible accidents. Some of their customers went insane, became delusional, even committed suicide! They couldn't handle what they saw about their past."

He looks into the hologram.

A woman holds a vial of red liquid.

She looks into a mirror, deranged. Suddenly she shatters the mirror violently with her fist. In another scene, a poorly dressed man shouts hysterically in a crowded marketplace. A third person balances at the edge of an open window, before leaping into the street below.

"Imagine killing someone," says Hermes, "or being killed in your past life. Betraying someone, or being betrayed. That's not easy to remember."

I recall the horror of seeing Juliet in the tomb. "By selling their memory perfumes," Hermes says, "the Capulets broke the Prime Law."

He stops walking.

"You *never* show anyone their past lives," Hermes looks directly at me. "Everyone has to remember for themselves. And they will. When they're ready."

He continues, before stopping again.

"Just like you did," he says.



ZU

"I have a confession," Lucrezia says.

She moves toward me. "I also have a personal motivation," she admits, vulnerably. "I don't usually tell anyone this. But I feel we have a bond." She pauses. "My father died when I was a baby. I never had a chance to know him. But what if we shared a past together? Perhaps one day I can remember him—" her voice trails off.

She gazes down to the floor.

I'm touched by her story.

I can see what it means to her. And also how we could be friends. "With your help, we could finally perfect the memory perfume," Lucrezia looks up. "We could change lives, Zu. Including our own."

Her words speak to a deeper part of me. The part that wants to help people.

I want to trust her, but my skepticism returns.

"Then why make Nepenthe?" I confront her. "If you want to help people remember?"

ZU X ORI

“Nepenthe is Tai’s personal project,” Lucrezia looks at me, clearly. “It’s the only time the Capulets have made an oblivion perfume.” I’m not sure who to believe. All I know is part of me belongs to the Capulets. And another part of me belongs with Orion.

If he’ll have me back.

I feel torn between two worlds.

“If I help you,” I say carefully, “what would happen to Orion?” I just want to know.

I cringe, holding my breath.



ORI

“Do you realize,” says Hermes, “how easily people can be manipulated? What if the Capulets altered the perfume formula? You could give people memories they never had! Suddenly you think you’re the reincarnation of Louis XIV or Mary Magdalene—or even Tupac Shakur! Thinking you’re someone you’re not is the ultimate delusion. With past lives, it’s all too easy.”

I am wishing Zu were here.

To see and hear this.

I TRUSTED YOU

"To counter this threat," Hermes says, "the Montagues developed healthier ways to retrieve past life memories." He looks at me. "Past lives don't need to be so mysterious! It's actually a science—and an art."

I step in front of Hermes, directly. "Why did you call me back?" I say. "To show me this?"

"Yes. And no."

"No?"

I can't hold back.

"I could have brought Zu here," I say, angrily. "I was right outside the store!"

Hermes lowers his head.

"And if you had," Hermes says, intently, "the Capulets would always be there, as an option. A temptation. Zu has to choose her own future."



ZU

Tai pushes past Lucrezia, toward me.

"If you join us, Zu," he says, "Orion will live. The future takes a different course."

ZU X ORI

My stomach bottoms out.

Hearing Tai, I don't feel I have a choice.

How could I not choose to save Ori? And possibly help others, as well. Besides, I've already burned my bridges. There's no one to help me now. I've betrayed Orion. And I could have gone to Lauren.

But I didn't.

I came here instead.

Did I actually come to choose the Capulets?

Or am I making a huge mistake? Whatever I decide feels cosmically important. Like I'm deciding the fate of my next five lives.

If that makes any sense.



ORI

"Destiny is a funny thing," Hermes muses, pacing the room in a wide oval. "Sometimes it seems so clear. Other times not at all."

"We're meant to be," I say.

I think to the meeting at Jack's Coffee.

I TRUSTED YOU

Hermes sighs, softly.

"Many things are," he says. "But people still miss their destinies. They choose one thing, when another choice would have led somewhere better."

He looks into the distance.

"It's happened to me," he says.

"When?"

Hermes takes his time answering.

"Well, more than once," he smiles, easily. "But I'm thinking of the last time. I had a teacher—" his eye sparkles, "and a friend—who I left too early. It was an impulsive choice that had consequences."

He doesn't say more about it.

"Sometimes a single choice," Hermes reflects, "can change a lifetime."



ZU

There's a numbness in my heart.

ZU X ORI

"I know this is difficult, Zu," Tai sounds compassionate. "But we *are* your family." I look down at the sterile, white floor, feeling powerless.

I close my eyes and think:

I'm sorry Ori. I tried.

"We can train you," Lucrezia says warmly. "We have the best perfumers in the world. You could finally put your talents to use." I can feel the pull to join them. It would be so easy, so comfortable.

So familiar.

"You'll get over Orion," Tai says, smugly. He just can't help himself.

This isn't my idea of family.

"Have you never loved anyone?" I blurt out.

Tai smiles coldly.

"Never."

His response feels almost evil. Like a gnarled, twisted root grown the wrong way.

"I don't believe you—" I say.

For an instant, Tai looks wounded and human. Then his iciness returns. "Think of the silver lining," he says. "You won't blame yourself for Ori's death."

I TRUSTED YOU

My eyes burn sulfur.

But what can I do? What I want most—a life with Ori—no longer feels possible. But if I choose the Capulets, I'll lead a cold, empty life. I know this.

Perfumes are only perfumes.

They're not love.



ORI

Hermes waves his hand. A new holographic display appears. "Look, Ori," he says. "This is how our world was supposed to be."

I see a city I don't recognize. The green avenues are filled with trees and translucent vehicles. The air itself seems crystal clear. Children are learning in open air environments. "People were inspired by new leaders in civics, science and arts," I hear Hermes saying. "Society realized that we shared one world. Innovations changed everything to benefit every human being. The power of politicians was reduced. Businesses and labor worked together, to meet real human needs. Culture leaped ahead, flourishing," Hermes narrates the changing scenes. "This

ZU X ORI

city is New Omega. It's what the community decided to rename New York."

The images are beautiful and evocative. Even the people appear physically different.

Somehow brighter.

"This is how humans appear," Hermes gestures toward the people of New Omega, "when not living in a world of fear. When society supported their humanity, instead of stifling it."

Hermes stands before the hologram. "Unfortunately, these new leaders never appeared. They were sidetracked from their destiny, by one thing or another. New Omega never happened." The images of the brilliant city slowly fade away into a grey emptiness.

Hermes's eyes remain hopeful.

"Progress continues, of course. We're just behind schedule," Hermes turns to me. "That's why Nepenthe is so dangerous," he says. "It keeps people from remembering who they really are, from awakening to their past. And to their future."

I've never thought of remembering as connected to destiny. But I guess it makes sense.

Every future has a past.

I TRUSTED YOU



ZU

Tai stands motionless. Only his right hand is moving. Slowly, I watch his fist clenching and unclenching. All of his intensity, his hate and rage is concentrated in his one clenched fist.

And then I see it.

It's the clenching of the fist.

The rage and the clenching of the fist. There's something familiar about it.

I'm starting to remember.

Oh my God.

Behind Tai, I see another figure. It's a ghostly shape, filled with bitterness and hate. Tai stands before me in the white Capulet lab, but superimposed on him, like a shadow, I see a person from my Verona life.

It's the angry figure of my brother.

Tybalt Capulet.

Oh my God, oh my God. This is the first time I'm seeing someone else's past, not just my own. I didn't even know it was possible.

ZU X ORI

I study Tybalt's twisted features. In his hardened face is the hurt he always carries, which fuels his bitter rage.

"Tybalt—"

Tai feels like an electrical storm. "Don't ever say that name—" he rasps.

"Why?" I'm still stunned.

"Why?" Tai rages. "You were my sister, Juliet! I looked after you when you were a baby. I helped raise you. And how did you thank me? You left us all, for a Montague! Have you no shame?"

His face is etched in pain.

"It wasn't like that," I resist.

But Tai is fuming. "Why did you even come here?" he spits venom. "To humiliate me?"

"No—" I say, defensively.

I realize it was a mistake to come. An incredible gigantic mistake. But I don't see a way out.

I feel trapped with the Capulets.

I gaze upward. There's a dark skylight above the lab. A bluish light is appearing.

I recognize it immediately.

I TRUSTED YOU

It's the light in the sky, from my dream of Verona. But now it's no dream. The blue white light is descending into the lab, changing the atmosphere of the lab. Tai and Lucrezia don't seem to notice.

But in this light, I can feel my hope.

For what I've always wanted.

For love. For truth.

Nothing else.

There's no going back. Not even if choosing Orion means his death. My truth is with Ori.

Now I know.

I didn't come to choose the Capulets. I came here to choose Ori.

In spite of everything.



ORI

The holograms have gone dark. There's an eerie stillness in the room. Hermes looks down. He seems distant, as if transported into the past.

ZU X ORI

"What changed you?" I break the silence. "You're not the same as Mercutio."

Hermes just stares ahead.

"Was it your last life?" I say.

Hermes smiles, thoughtfully.

"Yes," he says.

"Where was that?" I ask.

"In France."



ZU

I don't feel safe anymore.

I should be with Orion now. Not here. Lucrezia stands between me and the exit. I back toward her, toward the doors of the lab.

Will she let me leave?

"*Juliet*—" Tai rages.

He rushes at me rapidly.

I take the vial of Nepenthe from my jeans, holding it outstretched in my hand. Between myself and Tai. I don't even know if this does anything.

I TRUSTED YOU

Tai slows his step.

"Don't be silly," he says.

"I'm going to go now," I say evenly.

I keep backing away, toward the glass doors. Tai continues toward me. I put my fingers on the lid. I don't know if I actually dare open it.

Or what it would do.

"Be careful, Zu," Tai warns.

My elbow collides with a pink-colored bottle on the edge of a table. It crashes to the floor, breaking open. I smell hickory and strawberry.

Tai lunges at me. I run.

Too late.

I slip on the oily pink perfume. I fall hard on my elbows and knees.

Nepenthe shatters on the floor.

Right under my face.

I can't help but inhale it. Nepenthe explodes inside my head. It's incredible, exotic, intoxicating. I'm caught completely off guard. I find myself smiling, giddy, on the verge of laughter.

ZU X ORI

I tell myself to run.

I stumble past Lucrezia and down the stairs, through the stylish guests. I run out of the Capulet store. I run for blocks, until the streets seem dizzy.

But I can't outrun Nepenthe.

I feel it overwhelming me.

It's like a sticky film of plastic, over my emotions. For a few blocks, I wander aimlessly. I'm less and less certain where I came from. Vaguely, I sense something awful has happened.

Nepenthe doesn't seem to have a smell.

Instead, it's like an absence of smell. I float along, untouched by the fragrances wafting in the autumn air. Untouched by memories they might unlock.

I can't smell a thing.

Nepenthe is a world without any past. Without regrets. Without sorrows.

Without feelings.

It's so powerful, it's euphoric.

But beneath the bliss, I feel I'm fighting for my life, fighting to remember who I am. For another block, I struggle between the two sides.

I TRUSTED YOU

I'm floating on waves. The people on the sidewalk are bobbing along beside me. Somewhere in my mind, I feel I should find Orion.

But this feeling is so far away. Do I really need to do anything? I could just keep walking.

Or not.

Life is euphoric either way.

I meander along the beautiful streets. Are people looking at me? I feel I'm about to start laughing. But Orion, wait—what was it about Orion? I take out my phone, thinking I'll call him.

Ahead of me are pretty lights.

I am drawn toward the colors.

I feel I'm slow-dancing by myself. I'm like a honeybee moving toward a flower. My eyes are half-sleepy. I couldn't be happier. The tall buildings feel so friendly, the cars are cheerful and my feet are light.

Who was I going to call?

Orion.

I need to find Orion.

Yes! I hold onto this thought.

With all my strength.

ZU X ORI

Wait–find who?

Orion.

But why?

I can't remember why.

I gaze at the brown buildings around me. It's not clear to me how I arrived here. The square buildings all look the same. I turn in a dazed circle.

Find Ori.

I choose a direction. Now even the smallest decision feels painful. It would be so much easier not to choose. To go with the flow.

But I keep choosing.

I keep fighting, block after block.

Street corner after street corner.

Through the pain.

Find him.

Step after step.

It takes everything I have.

To continue.



I TRUSTED YOU

DELPHINE

The smoke is pouring over the barricades.

I leap forward, only to be thrown back, the force of a musket shot ripping through my shoulder. I collapse on the street, flat on my back.

The barricade has fallen.

The soldiers are pouring through.

I drag myself to a storefront, leaning myself against it, lightheaded. My vision is blurry. *Tabithe, I think, I should have stayed with you.*

I lie there, breathing weakly.



ZU

The red brick building appears.

It stands out, like a temple in the night. Somehow I've made it back. Somehow I'm here. I don't know how I got here. But it's not important.

I'm where I need to be.

I continue toward it.

ZU X ORI

A group of kids are gathered outside. It's hazy, but I feel like I know them. But from where?

Oh, of course!

It's Kimmo, Aisha and Jaden.

They spot me approaching them. They seem surprised to see me.

"Hey Zu," says Kimmo.

"Hey guys," I say.

"What are you doing here?" she eyes me.

"Oh, just taking a stroll," I reply. Kimmo looks at me sideways. "Are you okay?"

"Never better," I smile.

The three of them trade glances. I do a little tap dance where I'm standing.

That makes them laugh.

"We heard there was a party here," Kimmo explains. "But it looks like it's dead." She glances up at the darkened windows of the brick mansion.

I glance up too.

"Oh," I say.

I TRUSTED YOU

I start toward the stairs anyway, when Kimmo tells me they're going dancing. "Landon knows where," she says, eagerly. "Do you wanna come?"

"Um," I say.

"Come on," she brightens.

I look toward the brick mansion. Something about it stirs a warmth inside me.

"I think I—"

"It'll be so fun," says Kimmo.

She pulls on my arm, leading me away from the brick mansion. From where I was going. I don't feel the strength to resist. The four of us begin walking away.

I look back over my shoulder.

One last time.



DELPHINE

"Delphine—"

I imagine hearing my name.

The air is thick with acrid smoke, but from where I lie, I can see the peaceful sky above.

ZU X ORI

My eyes close.



ZU

Kimmo parks outside the club.

We get out nearly running. I follow Jaden and Aisha down into the basement building. We duck inside a doorway. There's a long narrow hallway, posters cling to the walls. It's dark and clammy.

But I don't care.

On the dance floor, it's crowded.

There are lights everywhere. Kimmo slips through the crowd, pulling me along. We head for the middle of the dance floor, raising our hands above us, as the music vibrates on our bodies.

Anything can happen now.

There's no more choices to make.

Nowhere I need to be.

Projections cover the walls of the cavernous dance floor. Kimmo is smiling at me. Tonight she seems so beautiful. She's wears a sleeveless shirt that shows off her toned, tattooed arm.

I TRUSTED YOU

I lose myself dancing with her.

Landon appears with Aisha, and the crowd closes around us. The four of us are dancing together. Ordinarily in a crowd like this, I'd be overwhelmed by a million scents and impressions.

But I don't smell a thing.

I see the pulsing lights and hear the flashing sounds. But I don't feel a thing.

The crowd swallows Kimmo and Aisha.

I'm left dancing alone with Landon. There's an energy between us that's new and exciting. I enjoy his eager and somewhat reckless energy. Before I know it, we're dancing together closely.

He has a sweet face and eyes.

Our arms brush lightly, our hips touch.

Landon places his hand around me. I feel his palm on my back, above my waist. Everyone is crowded together on the dance floor, pushing us closer.

The lights are flashing in rays. The music swirls and rocks and rises. Landon says something I can't hear. I'm glad—I have nothing to say. I put my arms around him, crossing my wrists behind his neck.

ZU X ORI

Landon moves to kiss me, and I let him.

His arms grasp my waist as we kiss. I feel our lips together. The lights and kiss are one big blur.

Life is one big blur.

Isn't it?

Suddenly Kimmo is at my side.

She's pulling on my arm. I turn and she's staring at me, as if to say: "*What are you doing?*" Kimmo looks both astonished and amazed.

She drags me from Landon.

We break away, giggling and nearly tripping through the crowd.

Landon chases us, but he can't keep up. I'm floating over the dance floor in Kimmo's hand. We burst into the bathroom. A group of girls at the sink stare at us, I guess because Kimmo and I look so amused. That makes us stop our laughing.

But only for a second.

The other girls glare and exit.

Inside the bathroom are the muffled and gritty sounds of the dance floor. I hear a remix of something, and the vocals keep repeating:

I TRUSTED YOU

"I would turn around but the light is gone

I'd come to you but I've lost this song"

I stand there, almost feeling something. I look at my face, in the dirty mirror above the sink. My empty eyes look back at me.

"So you left it high like a dream of mine

And you forgot his love was blind"

The face looks like me. It's my purple hair.

It's my chin and eyes.

But I don't recognize who I see.

There's something I need to feel.

There's something I need to remember. It's like an appointment marked on my calendar. But all the dates and days are blurry. The bathroom door swings open, two girls enter and again I hear:

"I'd run to you but I've lost this song"

ZU X ORI

I turn to Kimmo, confused.

I'm almost on the verge of tears, without knowing why. I start to cry, without a reason why. Kimmo hugs me, and then the feeling disappears.

I wipe my eyes.

We race out the bathroom, up the narrow hallway and into the New York night. Jaden and Aisha come rushing out the basement entrance. They jump in the car, Jaden in the backseat beside me.

We drive in the humid night.

I slink down into the seat, reclining. I rest my arm loosely out the window, the strand of red yarn still wrapped around my wrist.

I watch it flutter in the wind.

I'm not listening to the others. All I hear is the music in my head:

"You'd turn back but the night is long

I'd come to you but I've lost this song"

Casually, I untie the yarn.

I TRUSTED YOU

I watch it flutter, delicately, before the wind whisks it away. I stare into the mid-distance, unblinking.

We drive on for blocks. Outside my apartment, Kimmo drops me off. I head into the building alone and up the long elevator ride.

I don't feel blissful anymore.

I don't feel carefree.

I enter my bedroom, crash onto my bed and flop my head on my pillow. I stare up at the ceiling.

I don't feel anything at all.



EPISODE 9 TIMELINES

LAUREN

I wake up with a start.

I sit straight up, the sheets arranged around me. It's the dark of the night. I was dreaming. It was just a dream. It was the dream I always have. On the floor beside my bed, Lorenzo lies curled.

I recover my breath, gradually.

I TRUSTED YOU

I remember, I was inside a monastery. On my left was Orion, Zu on my right. In my outstretched arms, I held their hands in mine.

I held their fate in mine.

I was marrying them.

Lovingly I wrapped their hands together, in a white woven cloth. But I wrapped the cloth too tight. And their hands began to bleed.

They had trusted me.

And their hands began to bleed.

I fall back in bed, but I can't find sleep again.

I check for a message from Zu, but there's none. She and Ori were supposed to meet me tonight.

I lie there, in the darkness.



ORI

We've entered a beige room.

It's a modern room, just beyond the stone hallway, furnished with large white sofas and chairs. Immediately I

ZU X ORI

feel a sharp stabbing through my heart. I double over, one knee to the ground.

I shut my eyes tightly.

I feel like someone, or something, has just died. But I don't know why.

"Something's wrong," I look urgently at Hermes.

Hermes eyes me, compassionately.

"It can be painful," he says, "when timelines don't go as planned."

I've never felt this kind of pain.

Not even in the tomb.

Hermes is crossing the room, toward a large wooden table, where a holographic map of New York City appears. The map rotates, zooming out effortlessly into a display of North America.

"Enough holograms," I say.

"You need to see this, Ori."

"Not *now*—" I say.

My heart feels like it's bleeding out.

Hermes stands there, kindly.

"There's no other time," he says.

I TRUSTED YOU

Gradually I look up. On the hologram, a blue dot hovering near Los Angeles slowly extends into a line, moving toward New York City. "This is a timeline," Hermes says gently. "Everyone has one. It starts at your birth and runs through your life."

Now a second line appears.

This one is purple, moving toward New York from Hong Kong. "This is Zu's timeline," Hermes says to me. "Basically, a timeline is a series of appointments. Places you need to be, and people you need to meet, to move toward your destiny."

I am watching Zu's purple line.

"This is you and Zu moving to New York," Hermes points to the map. The purple line arrives in New York, where my blue line is waiting. "Your first appointment," Hermes looks satisfied. "It was supposed to be one year earlier. But no real harm."

I'm reminded what Zu said about her dad's job being delayed, by one year. "I know it was a difficult year for you," Hermes says.

The map swivels, hovering above Jack's Coffee in the Meatpacking District.

The blue and purple lines are converging again.

ZU X ORI

"This is your second appointment," Hermes observes the map. "The moment you and Zu meet. A bit tricky, but still successful."

"Tricky?" I say. "It was perfect—"

I rub my chest, which is still aching.

"Hardly," Hermes gives me a look. "That's the thing with appointments of destiny. People never know when they miss one. They just go on with their lives! But you and Zu nearly missed this one."

He points at the map.

"That meeting at Jack's wasn't your first chance to meet," Hermes says. "It was your last."

"Last?" I eye Hermes, across the table. "What does that even mean?"

He holds my gaze patiently.

"Answer one question for me," he says. "When was the first time you saw Zu?"

"At Jack's Coffee," I answer, obviously.

"No, it wasn't."

I swallow, hard.

I TRUSTED YOU

I resent the idea that anyone—especially Hermes—could know more about my past than me. I try to recall another time I could have seen Zu.

But nothing comes.

“Two weeks before Jack’s,” Hermes reminds me. “We went to a party, before school started.” I remember that night. It was a fourth floor apartment, in the summer heat. It wasn’t a huge party. But crowded enough so you couldn’t see everyone.

“Didn’t someone,” he says, “catch your eye?”

Instantly I remember.

Everything.

It was around midnight. I was chatting with Shanti and Wen, in a corner of the kitchen. Across the crowd, I saw a girl wearing a baseball cap. It was only a glimpse—I didn’t see her clearly—but something about her captured me. It was the way she moved.

I liked her immediately.

How could I forget this?

But now I’m remembering it exactly.

In my memory, the girl in the baseball cap has *purple hair*. Oh my goodness—it *is* Zu. Our eyes *almost* meet, for a

ZU X ORI

quarter of a second, from opposite sides of the room. I leave Shanti and Wen. The girl in the cap is moving toward me. Our paths are converging, near the entrance to the apartment.

We're about to meet.

It's inevitable.

Now I remember!

At the last moment, Angelo barrels between us. He whirls around, spilling his drink on my shirt.

I'm completely soaked.

I take my eye from Zu. It's only for a second, but when I look again, she's gone. Angelo is patting my shirt, trying to dry me off. I shake loose, descending the stairway, all the way to the street.

But the girl in the baseball cap is gone.

"What a shame," Hermes shakes his head. "It was a perfect set up! Two young lovers meeting across a room. But even the best-laid plans—"

"Why didn't you say anything!"

"I couldn't."

"Why not?"

I TRUSTED YOU

"Ori, you know better than anyone," Hermes tells me, "about magical meetings. The stars have to align! That's how you know it's meant to be."

We both pause, reflecting.

"Like in Verona," he says.

"How do you know all this?" I say.

Hermes grows silent.

"We have friends in common, Ori," he says.

Hermes stands across the table, his timeless gaze piercing.

A silence is falling over the room. "Friends who can help us," he says. The texture of the room is beginning to change. I am aware of a bluish white light, seemingly above our heads. The air is filling with light.

We both stand perfectly still.

"Do you feel that, Ori?"

I feel *something*.

"Is that them?"

Hermes keeps his eyes on mine. "Yes," he says, softly. "It's them."

"Who are they?" I say, without moving.

ZU X ORI

The bluish light is enveloping the room. It brings a timeless, multi-dimensional quality. Like a bridge between heaven and earth.

"They are Montagues," Hermes looks directly in my eyes, "who are in-between lives. They've died and haven't been born again."

I am bathed in blue light.

In this light, I feel the past, present and future, all happening at once. I feel Zu and myself—from Verona to now and into the future—and others too. I can feel Hermes, Lauren—my sister—and millions of others, their hopes and their love and their pain.

Hermes says, softly, "Those between lives can see things we can't see. The rules of the physical world don't apply to them. They don't communicate with words, but ideas, thoughts, feelings. They try to guide us toward our appointments."

The blue light is beginning to fade.

I don't know how much time has passed. But something closer to normal is returning. "With their help," Hermes glances upward, "and the help of others, we tried a second time to connect you two."

I'm still recovering from the blue light.

I TRUSTED YOU

And the memory of Zu in the baseball cap.

"One week later," says Hermes. "You went to the Met on a Saturday." I quickly recall my trip to the museum. "Zu was there?" I say surprised.

"No. But how did you get there?"

I try to remember.

"Uber," I say.

I remember the moment. I'd had a sudden inspiration to visit the Met. I was about to confirm my ride. But then, I had second thoughts.

I hesitated.

For thirty seconds.

"Thirty seconds too long," says Hermes. "If you hadn't waited, you would have been pooled with Zu. She was going uptown, and you would have struck up a conversation. You would have gone to the Met together, on that Saturday."

"It was only thirty seconds!" I argue.

"Destiny doesn't wait," Hermes says. "Instead of Zu's Uber picking you up on Gansevoort Street, it picked up someone else on 26th Avenue."

"Who?" I feel weirdly jealous.

ZU X ORI

"A businessman from Toronto," he shrugs. "It doesn't matter. They didn't say a word to each other." I suddenly feel deeply saddened, about this day at the museum that Zu and I never had.

"I guess it's silly to feel sad," I say aloud, "about something that never happened."

"Not at all," Hermes disagrees.

I look up, quietly.

"Sometimes the things that *didn't* happen are the saddest things in life," he says, honestly.

Hermes claps his hands.

"But you *did* meet."

On the holographic map, the purple and blue lines have converged, in a kind of spiral. "That's what matters! On your final chance—that morning at Jack's Coffee—you and Zu met each other."

The two lines spiral together, moving through Central Park and Times Square. But when they reach Hermes' house, they burst and fizzle. The two lines spiral away, drunkenly, in different directions.

"Uh oh," Hermes leans forward.

I TRUSTED YOU

"This is worse than I thought," he looks concerned.
"Your timelines are separating."

I feel the wrenching in my gut.

What I'm seeing on the map is exactly what I've been feeling, since my argument with Zu. With every hour Zu feels further away.

"You and Zu have a third appointment," Hermes says seriously. "This appointment is the reason you met. Do you know what it is?"

I know exactly.

My wrenching gut won't quit.

"The Lights," I say.



In the empty Capulet lab, only a single light remains. Tai sits across from RITA at the ceramic table. A cold lamp spotlights the table.

Tai slumps, staring at his hand.

Clenching it in a fist.

"These types of things," RITA studies Tai's hand, "are often carryovers from past lives."

"Verona I think," Tai says.

ZU X ORI

RITA observes Tai quietly.

“Or before,” she says.



The city lights are shining.

On Broadway, Lucrezia wanders along the street signs and theaters, admiring the New York night. She passes a Nepenthe ad, without looking up.

Her eyes drift upward, into the beautiful night, where the bright signs shine in wonder.

Ahead, in the distance, are the Times Square lights. Lucrezia presses a finger to her ear, listening to the song echoing in her earbuds.

She remembers her father, distantly.

She wipes a tear, smiling.

Outside a large theater are display posters, behind glass, advertising the plays inside. One is a poster for *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*.

Lucrezia gazes into the poster.

In the dim reflection of the glass, she sees a young woman in a white dress and black scarf. Lucrezia tilts her head softly, to one side.

I TRUSTED YOU

Her platinum hair drifts gently.

Beside the theater is a small café. A lighted sign in the window says: *Open Late*.

Lucrezia steps inside, curiously.

She looks around warmly, waiting in a short line. She moves toward the barista.

"Caffé Americano," she says.

The barista grabs a marker.

"What's your name?"

"Lu."



ORI

On the holographic map, the blue and purple lines continue spinning apart. The two lines drift slowly away, aimlessly.

Like unmoored ships.

Hermes takes a puzzled step back. "What's this about?" he asks me. "The Capulets?"

"No," I am certain. "It's something else."

Hermes closes his eyes, thinking.

ZU X ORI

He grabs a narrow, black case from a shelf across the room. Hermes carries it deliberately, placing it on a table between the sofas.

"Open this," he says.

"What's inside?"

"My backup plan," Hermes says.

On the side of the case are three latches. I flip them open hesitantly, then raise the lid.

What's inside makes no sense.

It's a feeling similar to when I first imagined the white dress. Inside the case is an elegantly crafted sword, with a silver blade and black hilt.

"This is *Adagio*," Hermes tells me.

Adagio, I think.

It means gracefully.

"It's your sword, from Verona."

I sit backward, quickly.

"It's not the original," Hermes rephrases. "But I retrieved the exact details. This is a 3D printed version made of titanium."

I TRUSTED YOU

Reluctantly, I lift the sword from its case. The grip sits comfortably in my hand.

I feel different holding Adagio.

I stand from the sofa, extending the sword in my arm, feeling its weight and balance. I nearly smile, but I'm struck by a flash of memory. I see the Piazza delle Erbe and Adagio killing Tybalt.

It's what led to my banishment.

To my separation from Juliet. To finding her body in the tomb.

"Why give me this?" I say, angrily.

I drop Adagio to the floor.

"Because," says Hermes, patiently, "our plans have changed and you need to be ready."

"For what?"

"For anything."

"What are you talking about?" I glare.

I walk away from Adagio.

"Timelines aren't a joke, Ori," Hermes watches me. "They can literally change the future. Your appointment with Zu is bigger than just yourselves."

ZU X ORI

"I'm not a fighter," I shake my head.

Hermes says, intently: "The Romeo I knew was a lover *and* a fighter."

"I *killed* people!" I say. "Including myself."

This is why I never joined the fencing team. Even after all of Hermes' invitations. I never wanted anything to do with those memories.

I pick up Adagio, returning it to its case.

Hermes grabs my wrist. Our eyes meet inches apart. His other hand strikes me hard in the chest, and I'm thrown backward through the air.

I land behind the sofa, sliding across the floor.

Hermes is advancing upon me. "The sword doesn't matter. I printed it to prove a point."

"Are you crazy?" I sit up.

Hermes throws Adagio at me.

I ignore it. Hermes grabs my shoulder, catapulting me across the room again. He kicks Adagio toward me. I pick it up, desperately.

And scramble to my feet.

"What is *wrong* with you?" I hold Adagio vaguely forward, ready to defend myself.

I TRUSTED YOU

Hermes drops his hands, peacefully.

"If I'm completely honest," he chuckles. "You were a lot tougher in Verona. I'm not saying you need to kill anyone! But we need your *killer instinct*."

I keep Adagio lowered.

"In Verona, you had that," Hermes says. "But your instincts are stuck in your past. We need to retrieve them, if you're going to help Zu."

"How?" I fume.

I'm tired of Hermes' mysteries.

"We've already started," he winks.

"I'm sick of your riddles."

Hermes laughs at me. "But what are you gonna do about it?"

I feel conflicted and uncertain.

"This is the kind of hesitation," Hermes smirks, "that's going to lose you Zu. The way you lost Juliet," he mocks me, "in Verona."

I can't believe his words.

Something snaps.

ZU X ORI

I lunge at Hermes with Adagio, hilt forward and the blade raised. I don't have a plan.

I don't even think.

Hermes meets my attack, grabbing my wrists and throwing my weight against the wall. We stand together, our hands locked on Adagio.

"Now, Ori—" Hermes shouts in my face.

I push back, with all my strength.

"Feel what you're feeling!"

All I feel is my rage.

"Feelings are your link," Hermes says to me, point blank, "to retrieving your past. But you have to feel them completely!"

I feel my rage at Hermes. My anger at the Capulets—my anger at Zu. My anger for everything that's gone wrong. In this life and the last.

"Stop holding back!" Hermes shouts.

I'm furious, and ashamed—because I know he's right. I *am* holding back. But why? To stay in control? To not hurt anyone?

I feel something erupting.

I TRUSTED YOU

"Good, Ori—" says Hermes, "now go deeper!" I can barely hear him. My anger drowns out his voice.

It's the anger of killing.

Hermes' face is beginning to morph.

I no longer see Hermes, but the face of Tybalt, Juliet's brother. I nearly panic. Is this a trap? Is it actually Tybalt who's lured me to this room? "Stay with your anger," I hear Hermes speaking through Tybalt's face. "These are your retrieval memories."

The beige room is disappearing.

Now there's a bright blue sky, the wooden floor is turning to earth-colored stone. The table and comfortable sofas evaporate, revealing the canvas awnings and storefronts of the Piazza delle Erbe.

I've just stabbed Tybalt.

My hatred of him rages in my veins.

I smell Tybalt's blood.

Why am I remembering this? I never wanted to feel this way again. "*Don't shy away, Ori,*" I hear Hermes command. "This is a part of you. Part of retrieval is remembering unpleasant things."

Tybalt shakes free of Adagio.

ZU X ORI

"You haven't killed me," says Tybalt, now in his own voice. "It's hardly a wound. Now fight!" Tybalt launches at me violently. I scamper away, dodging his blows raining down on me. Nothing of the beige room remains. It's only the piazza and a fight to the death.

"Hermes!" I shout.

Tybalt charges at me, barely missing. "It's only a memory, Montague," he says. "You can't be hurt." Tybalt slams his sword hilt into my chest, knocking me down. A burning pain rips into my lungs.

I gasp for air.

"*That* hurt—" I call out.

Tybalt rages after me, attacking with his rapier. It cuts a swath through the wall of a building. "You're reliving it, Ori," says Tybalt, hammering me again. "But it's not real pain. It's just the memory of the experience." Tybalt smashes my jaw with the base of his sword.

I collapse, tasting blood. I feel the jagged edge of my tooth, rolling on my tongue.

I spit it out.

"This feels real," I cough, my head splitting.

I TRUSTED YOU

"That's because it *was*," says Tybalt, arrogantly. "Now get up, Montague!"

I feel fury, hearing my old name.

My hatred of Tybalt is renewed. I labor to my feet, wielding Adagio. Tybalt attacks, but surprisingly, I repel him easily. We battle along the sun-caked storefronts of the Piazza delle Erbe.

I'm using Adagio with a skill I've forgotten.

"Feel how your body moves," Tybalt instructs, as he smashes a wooden pole to bits. "In your movements, there is the memory, the knowledge of fighting—but more importantly, *the instinct and will to fight*. That's what you want to retrieve."

"Like this?" I clobber Tybalt backward with my forearm. He bleeds from his nose.

"That's it," he smiles.

Tybalt beckons me on. We fight ferociously. I gain the upper hand, until Tybalt retakes it. I land two more punches to his face.

"Be aware of every move," Tybalt says, through his dirty, bleeding face. "You can only retrieve what you *feel*. Feel how Adagio feels in your hand. Feel how you attack and defend, feel your stance, the way your feet move. But most

ZU X ORI

importantly, feel *how much you care! How much you would give—for what you care about most!*"

Everything, I think.

Tybalt slashes at me.

He knocks me down, crushing his knee in my ribs. I roll to the side, dodging his killing blow.

We rage on, metal to metal.

I would give everything.

I feel my sweat and hate. I swing away in unchecked fury, overwhelming Tybalt, until he can no longer defend himself. My next thrust skewers his flesh.

Everything.

Tybalt collapses, my sword in his side.

He lifts his dying head.

"That'll do," I hear Hermes' voice again.

The Piazza delle Erbe wavers once, then disappears. The objects and tables of the beige room reform before my eyes. We're standing in the exact position where we began.

Hermes releases me from his grip.

He's not bloody or bleeding.

And neither am I.

I TRUSTED YOU

Although my chest aches like fire. "My friend," Hermes says soberly, "that was beautiful."

Rays of sunshine fall on the wooden floor. "How long has it been?" I say.

"Seven hours," Hermes checks his watch. "Time in retrieval is slower than time in the present."

He retakes Adagio from me, swinging it at my head. I duck and grab a broomstick. I sweep his legs with the broom, flipping Hermes to the ground.

"I guess it worked," he laughs.

"But how did we stand here?" I'm amazed. "For seven hours?"

Hermes picks himself up.

"It's all part of the training," he says simply. I want to ask more, but I don't even know my question. "This is about more than you and Zu," Hermes says. "The Montagues and Capulets are a small act in a much larger play."

He hands me Adagio, by the hilt.

"So what now?" he says.

"We find Zu."



ZU X ORI

ZU

When I wake, it's morning.

I lie in my bed.

It feels like a morning, like any other. I brush my teeth, shower, and look in my closet. In the corner is a black dress that I never wear.

I take it out.

In the mirror, I look at myself.

I lean forward, examining my eyes.



ORI

I park my scooter outside Trinity Rose.

Hermes and I approach the brownstone building. I haven't set foot here since last year. It feels somewhat surreal, but I'm in my own world, and I hardly notice everyone's eyes on me.

We enter the main doors.

I'm only here for Zu.

ITRUSTED YOU

But in the hallways, I can't ignore the stares. Kids at open lockers stop what they're doing, looking. I hear my name whispered, a dozen times.

Ms. Hernandez, the principal, greets me, "Good to see you, Orion," she smiles enthusiastically. I say hello, smiling and nearly stopping for her.

But not quite.

I can't stop. For anyone.

Not until I find Zu.

I notice banners for The Lights, hung alongside the sides of the hallway.

The Lights.

Our third appointment.

"It's only been one night," I turn to Hermes. "Our timelines can't be *that* split, right?"

Hermes shrugs, uncertainly.

We enter the student lounge. Groups of students are sitting around wooden tables, eating snacks and hanging out before class. Some of them look up.

I can feel them watching.

Sitting at a far table is Zu.

ZU X ORI

She's sitting with some friends, her head tilted downward. My heart lifts, just seeing her.

It feels like ages, since last night.

But there she is.

Like always.

Zu wears a black dress, which comes to a sharp end below her thigh. She doesn't see me yet. Surrounding her are two girls I don't know. Sitting beside them, for some reason, is Landon.

I feel I'm seeing Zu for the first time. She's talking in her easy, natural way. She brushes her purple hair, which covers her eyes, to one side.

I reach her table.

Zu turns to me. Her eyes are circled in dark eyeshadow. But it's her gaze that makes me freeze. Something is so wrong. Zu is looking in my eyes.

But without love.

Without anything.

"Hey Ori," she says.

Her voice isn't warm, or cold.

It's just empty. The way you would speak to someone you hardly know. I shift to my back foot.

I TRUSTED YOU

“Zu—” I look in her eyes.

“That’s me,” she replies.

My stomach plummets. Is Zu trying to punish me? For last night? For running away? “I was hoping I’d find you here,” I explain, uncomfortably.

Zu’s friends look toward her.

“I guess you did,” she smiles.

But it’s an empty smile.

A smile for anyone. There’s an awkward pause at the table. I try to understand what’s happening. Zu doesn’t seem troubled. But it’s like she’s gone.

Something has taken her place.

“Can we talk alone?” I suggest.

Zu’s friend with the tattoo observes me in a friendly way. I feel she’s on my side.

“These are my friends,” Zu says. “If you want to say something, you can say it in front of everyone.”

“Oh—I get it,” I say. “This is part of your rehearsal. For The Lights.” I look at Landon and almost laugh. I don’t really believe this.

But it’s my only explanation.

ZU X ORI

Neither Zu nor her friends say another word. I stand without moving, afraid to reveal my emotions. "Would you give us a moment?" I say to her friends. Now Landon is looking at me. "Hey Ori—" he says. "She said no."

I turn my head.

"What are you doing here?" I say.

Landon stares back.

"What are *you* doing here?" he replies.

Oh wow.

Is this really happening?

My eyes hurry from Landon to Zu. I don't know what's going on here. But it feels so wrong. I hear one of Zu's friends whisper to the other, "Zu and Ori, or Zu and Landon?"

Zu's stare is frigid now.

"Is Ori bothering you?" asks Landon.

I've had enough of him. "Listen—Landon," I say. "I don't know what you think is happening, but just—" I pause, for the right words, "shut up."

"It's okay, Landon," says Zu.

I can't believe my ears.

I TRUSTED YOU

I reach across the table, taking Zu by the hand. Incredibly, Landon grabs my arm.

“Hands off, Ori—”

I seize Landon’s elbow, twisting hard. I drag him forward onto the tabletop, until his cheek is pressed down hard against the surface.

I hold him down.

I’m astonished.

I can’t believe what I’ve done. I’ve never reacted this way in my life. *This is the retrieval*, I think to myself. My hands knew what to do.

They remembered.

Zu’s two friends look riveted. Everyone else in the lounge has stopped what they’re doing. They watch from their seats.

Landon struggles on the tabletop.

I tighten my hold to make him quiet. I don’t feel angry. Or any emotion at all.

Only clear and calm.

Ready to act.

One of Landon’s friends comes toward me. Hermes places a hand on his chest, stopping him.

ZU X ORI

Zu stares at me, over Landon's slumped body. "I think you better leave, Ori," she says. My strength empties out of me. Zu looks at me, as if I don't matter. As if Landon doesn't matter. As if nothing matters. She stares at me with a machine-like intensity.

I glance at her bare wrists.

"Where's the yarn?" I demand.

"I lost it."

"What's your problem?"

"What's yours?" says Zu. "We had a couple kisses. That doesn't mean you own me."

"A couple kisses?" I repeat, unbelieving. This is too much. "Have you lost your mind?"

Zu inhales tensely.

"We have things to do," I say.

"Like what?"

"Everything we talked about!"

Zu narrows her eyes.

"The Lights?"

"Yes!"

"Well, I'm helping Landon," she says.

I TRUSTED YOU

I inhale fiercely.

"You're just too romantic, Ori," sighs Zu. "It's what they call a tragic flaw."

"Tragic flaw?" I say, pressing down hard on Landon's arm. I hear Landon whimper weakly. "Was kissing me on the High Line a flaw? Was Central Park a flaw? Was Verona a flaw? Was dying for each other a flaw?"

It comes out like a cannon.

Zu sits stone-like. I can feel she's been reached. Even if she doesn't show it. But the blankness remains.

"It was just a couple kisses," she repeats.

The fight drains out of me.

I let go of Landon, who keeps his forehead low to the table anyway. I turn away from them, walking out of the lounge.

Hermes catches me, quickly.

"Ori!" he grabs my arm.

I shake him off.



ZU

I watch as Ori leaves. I sense something significant has happened, but my expression doesn't change. I sit motionless at the table. I feel an immediate urge to run after Ori, but it quickly passes. Instead, I tap two of my fingers on the table.

One.

After the other.

I'm genuinely confused.

What was Ori talking about? About dying for each other? It all felt so dramatic.

But also so familiar.

My two fingers keep tapping.

"Are you okay, Zu?" says Kimmo. She seems concerned, which only bothers me more. "What was all that about Verona?"

"No idea," I reply curtly.

"Ori seems like he really loves you," says Kimmo. My fingers stop tapping. I'm staring down the hallway, where Orion just walked out.

"He seems cuter this year," says Aisha.

I TRUSTED YOU

"He seems like a bully," says Landon.

"Shut up, Landon—" I say, surprising myself. I grab my backpack and tablet.

I head straight for the hallway.



I see Ori walking away, at the end of the hall. I take a few, quick steps toward him.

"Hey—"

Ori comes to a slow stop.

His back is toward me.

Everyone in the hallway has stopped what they're doing. I hear a single locker shut, and then it's completely quiet.

"Are you just leaving?" I say.

Ori turns around.

He walks deliberately toward me. I stand where I am. Around us a small group of kids closes in, forming a circle. Now we're face to face.

Ori looks at me.

"Are you stopping me?" he says.

ZU X ORI

Our eyes are inches apart.

Neither of us move. I stare into Ori's features. I sense something melting, far below my exterior. A series of images—two young people I don't recognize—flash across my mind. My hands curl upward, slightly.

But I can't feel a thing.

"No," I say.



I watch Ori walking away.

The door to Trinity Rose opens and closes. I'm left standing alone in the hallway. The kids around me have lost interest and dissolve.

I stare at the tiled floor.

Then I head off to class.

I cross the lounge toward the stairs. I feel Kimmo, Aisha and Landon watching me. I slide my hand along the railing of the stairs. I can't shake the sense I've left something behind.

And ugh.

I still can't smell a thing.

Lauren's class is on the second floor.

I TRUSTED YOU

When she sees me, she breaks away from another student. "Where have you been?" Lauren looks worried. "I've been calling you."

"My phone was on airplane."

"You were supposed to come over," Lauren says, with a scolding undertone. "With Orion."

"Oh, right," I knit my brow.

This feels like ancient history.

"I met up with some friends, we went dancing," I say. "I guess we got sidetracked." Lauren has that same confused look that Ori did.

"How is Ori?" she asks.

"I think he's fine."

I shrug.

"Fine?" repeats Lauren.

She obviously has more to say, but she leaves to start the class. I sit through Lauren's lecture. Usually it's my favorite class. But today it's just meh. I enjoy what Lauren says about comedy—I'm the only one who laughs out loud—but the part on tragedy is a yawner. Lauren calls on me, but I have nothing to say.

This seems to annoy her more.

ZU X ORI

After class Lauren finds me, as I'm leaving. "Zu!" Lauren practically shouts.

She steps in front of me, blocking the door. I look strangely at Lauren. "You can't just leave, Zu," she says. "Tell me what happened."

"With what?" I shake my head.

"With Orion," Lauren answers. "With the Capulets—with everything!"

The Capulets, right. The other students file past us. Lauren and I stand in the doorway, until we're alone. "I went to see them," I tell Lauren. "It was after Ori got mad at me. They had a really cool lab."

"You had an argument with Ori?"

"It's no biggie, Lauren," I say. I edge past her into the hallway. "There's more fish in the sea."

Lauren looks furious.

Why is everyone so agitated today?

Now she's following me down the hallway. It's a little creepy, I won't lie.

"What else?" she demands.

"Oh," I slow, reminded. "I spilled Nepenthe on myself."

I TRUSTED YOU

Lauren's eyes open wide. She places her arm in my path. "We need to go see Orion," she says.

I duck around her again.

"Lauren, I have a class."



Beneath the brown buildings, a car carrying Tai and Lucrezia weaves through traffic. Tai rests against the headrest, his arms tightly across his chest. He suppresses a painful expression.

"Are you okay?" Lucrezia asks him. "Last night looked difficult."

Tai doesn't respond.

"You never mentioned your past with Juliet," her eyes examine him. "Have you ever considered this trip might be personal for you?"

"Of course it's personal," Tai snaps.

Lucrezia looks defensive. "Well, maybe you could put that aside. At least for now."

Tai shakes his head.

"It's personal for you, too," he says. Lucrezia knows he means her father. She hardens her lip.

ZU X ORI

They enter the grey cobblestone streets of the Meatpacking District. Tai turns his head abruptly, toward the rear window. As if sensing something.

“Stop the car,” Tai tells the driver.

He jumps out quickly into the street. Tai walks directly away from the car. “Where are you going?” Lucrezia exits the vehicle.

Tai waves her away.

“Tai!” shouts Lucrezia.

Ignoring her, Tai steps past pedestrians, looking left and right. He turns in a restless circle, then starts forward again, reading the street signs, looking around at the buildings and shops.

He sees the sign for Gansevoort Street.

His steps grow more sure.

Across from the Whitney Museum, Tai stops as if he’s lost the scent. Finally, he looks directly upward. Above the corner restaurant is Ori’s studio.



I TRUSTED YOU

ZU

When I come out of history class, Hermes is waiting for me. I dodge my way around him. But I feel him following after me.

Finally I whirl around.

"What—"

Hermes looks at me, directly. "I heard what you said to Lauren. In the hallway."

"About what?"

"Nepenthe."

I raise an eyebrow and begin walking away.

"You need to see Ori," says Hermes.

"I just saw him."

I am still walking away.

"Wait—" Hermes catches up.

Hermes is standing in front of me. I step around him again. "Come on," Hermes says, playfully. "What do I have to do? Pay you?"

I stand in the hallway.

"A hundred dollars," he offers.

"Five hundred," I say.

ZU X ORI

"Seriously?"

Hermes looks at me, in shocked disbelief.

I walk away again.

"Three hundred," he says.

"Fine."



Tai ascends the stairwell of 71 Gansevoort, almost in a trance. Upon the third floor landing, he waits. He turns to the door on his right.

Tai removes a small link from his necklace. In his fingers, it extends into a dark cylinder.

He opens the lock with it.

The door swings open, lazily.

Inside is Ori's studio. Tai eyes the workspace, with a mixture of envy and loathing. He steps silently through the rooms, examining the cluttered work table, the dress forms and racks.

He sees the white dress.

And walks toward it.

I TRUSTED YOU

Tai stands facing the dress. He wears an empty expression, remembering his life in Verona, his memories with Juliet, his death in the piazza. His heart darkens with hate for it all.

He strokes the folds of the dress.

Tai goes to the work table. He scans the tabletop, seeing swaths of fabrics, scissors, a handheld butane torch. Tai returns with the torch.

He ignites the cloth of the dress.

The fabric engulfs in fire.

"Tybalt—"

Tai hears the shameful name.

He whirls around, facing the voice. At the entrance of the studio is Orion. They stand facing each other, as the white dress burns.



EPISODE 10 **LOVE AWAKENS**

ORI

I've just shouted *Tybalt*.

Why did I say that name?

It just came out. I saw the white dress burning and this person in black. I've never seen him before. But instantly I knew: *this is Tybalt*.

He stares at me, furious.

"Orion—"

LOVE AWAKENS

Something triggers my memory. From the retrieval with Hermes last night. The rage and venom of Tybalt, right in front of me. This person looks nothing like Tybalt.

But it's exactly the same rage.

And somehow I also know: this is Tai, who gave Nepenthe to Zu.

Who did something to Zu.

That's the last straw.

Tai turns, like a tiger pulled by the tail. But I'm not afraid of him. My memory of killing Tybalt is fresh from the retrieval.

I'm just enraged he's here.

I drop the case I'm carrying, with Adagio inside. I start toward him.

"What's happened to Zu?"

"It's too late, Orion," Tai says.

"What did you do to her?" I nearly shout.

The room feels set to explode. It can't contain us both. I'm raw, in a way I've never been. I don't want to hear another word from Tai.

We stand across the room, opposite each other.

ZU X ORI

In Tai's hand is a black object, which extends into a long, rod-shaped cudgel. "Come on, Romeo," Tai snarls. "I owe you one."

Behind him, my white dress burns.



ZU

I leave Trinity Rose with Hermes.

We cross the empty, inner courtyard toward the main doors. Hermes is walking beside me closely, as if he expects I might run.

"So we're skipping class?" I say.

"Home school," he replies.

"That's witty."

We pass a grassy plot with a couple small trees and rose bushes. Something on the stem of the rose bush catches me eye.

I slow and look closer.

It's a grasshopper.

I stop walking.

LOVE AWAKENS

There's something unusual about this grasshopper. I stand there looking at it.

I can't understand.

Why it touches me, so much.

I keep staring at the grasshopper. My memory flashes to a grassy field in the sun. The image flickers out, before reappearing, briefly.

But I see more grasshoppers.

In the sun.

And there's something—about this field.

So many grasshoppers.

So much sunlight.

So much—

Feeling.

That I can't feel.

The grasshoppers are flying in the field

But why.

Am I seeing this?

ZU X ORI

The sunlight in the golden grass

Why.

The golden field fades away. I stare at the grasshopper on the rose bush, empty inside.

Hermes reappears at my side.

He looks at me.

"Pretty grasshopper," he says.

"Yeah," I say.



ORI

I head for the burning dress.

Tai blocks my way.

I'm literally shaking. A lifetime of hatred boils over. For everything Tybalt has done. In New York and Verona.

Tai steps toward me, spewing venom.

He throws his black cudgel at me, wildly. It misses my face, ending up along the wall by the windows. I accelerate toward Tai.

We launch toward each other. Our arms lock, eyes inches apart.

LOVE AWAKENS

Tai bares his teeth.

Like he's programmed to fight me.

He gains an inch of leverage, and I'm thrown to the back of the studio. I crash into rolls of fabric, which fall on top of me.

Tai laughs.

I pick myself up unhurt.

Again we target each other. This time I fling Tai onto a table. He grabs an iron, swinging at my head. Tai swings again, barely missing my face. The iron smashes into the table, obliterating.

I knock Tai back.

He attacks with a pair of fabric shears. I'm not expecting *this* much ferocity.

I feel Tai actually wants to kill me.

Tai slashes at me with the shears. I grab a heavy strip of denim, catching his wrist.

I smash his face with my forearm.

"What's wrong with Zu?" I shout.

"She did it to herself," he spits.

"Did *what*?" I demand.

ZU X ORI

Tai gloats.

"Why should I tell you?" he says.

I throw him across the studio. He lands atop the black case containing Adagio, which breaks open, spilling Adagio onto the floor.

Tai stares at the sword.

He looks mesmerized by its sight.

Tai observes the metal blade. "Is this," he turns toward me darkly, "what I think it is?" He rises to his feet, raising the blade. "The same sword you used against me?"

Tai staggers toward me.

Holding Adagio has unhinged him even further. "I've been waiting for this," Tai hurls his words at me, "for *such* a long time."

I take a half-step back.

Tai's hatred is overwhelming.

He lunges toward me with Adagio. I retreat defenseless across the room. Tai breaks through everything in his path, scattering tabletops and knocking over lamps and furniture. I am forced against the brick wall.

Where Tai's cudgel lies.

LOVE AWAKENS

I lift the black cudgel. It's amazingly dense, but also light in my hands. Tai raises Adagio above his head, preparing his blow.

An eerie silence descends on us.

I recognize this feeling.

It's an unmistakable time crossing. But instead of Hermes' presence inside of Tybalt, it's Tybalt himself.

The difference is total.

Between a memory and war.

The brick studio collides with the sandy square in Verona, where I am facing Tybalt. Our fight to the death. Two battles, stretching over hundreds of years. The outcome in Verona is known.

This one is not.

Tybalt strikes with his rapier.

He attacks like a hurricane, making the retrieval with Hermes feel almost like a simulation.

But this is no simulation.

In the background, Mercutio lies dead.

Beneath the Verona sun.

ZU X ORI

I'm enraged.

I meet Tybalt's attack.

"I meant you no harm—" I rage at Tybalt. "I could have called you brother!"

"In what life?" Tybalt huffs.

"This one!"

"Villain!" says Tybalt, crazed.

He prepares a thundering blow, crashing his sword down upon me.

I wield the black cudgel, blocking the blow.

Tai hammers me again.

I defend and return his anger with the black cudgel. The lightweight weapon strikes his chest, knocking him backward.

"What happened to Zu?" I demand again.

"She's safe from you," Tybalt lashes.

I attack, forcing him back.

"She doesn't belong to you!" I shout.

"Nor to you—"

LOVE AWAKENS

"She does," I say vengefully. "You are merely a brother! I have married her."

Tybalt's face writhes in pain.

"Liar of lies!"

He charges madly.

"My lips are the proof," I shout at him. "She has loved them more than yours."

Tybalt rages berserk.

He slashes at me with Adagio.

It's pure rage. I duck and dodge, sewing machines and dress forms toppling in Tai's wake. A wild blow strips the overhead lights from the ceiling.

They come crashing down.

"She's forgotten about you," Tai sneers. "As she should have, long ago!"

Hearing this strikes my fears.

"Make her remember," I threaten.

"I can't," says Tai.

He grins, darkly.

"It's over."

ZU X ORI

I batter Tybalt's face.

All my rage overwhelms him. I bludgeon him with the hilt of Adagio.

"We were kin!" I shout.

"Never, imposter."

"Have you no love?" I spit.

"Love?" Tybalt seems incredulous. "Spoken from the thief of it!"

"I've taken nothing."

"No, everything—"

Tybalt's eyes tear, through his blood.

He swings wildly at me. But his fury seems more sadness than anger.

I strike back, throwing my shoulder into Tai. My fist crashes through his face. He collapses on the floor, laughing languidly.

"How?" I demand.

Tai staggers to his feet.

LOVE AWAKENS

I beat him again with my hands. He slumps onto the frame of an open window. Adagio slips from his grasp, falling out the window.

Tybalt wriggles along the ground, defenseless. His sword lies in the distance.

I advance on him with Adagio.

"There's nothing you can do," I tell Tybalt. "Juliet and I are joined."

"For hours," he scoffs.

"Lifetimes," I say.

"What is your week-old love—" Tybalt crawls along the ground, "compared to a brother's? She was the one devotion in my miserable life."

"And death," I say.

Tybalt props himself up, his eyes dark. Behind us Mercutio lies on the ground.

"Romeo is not kind," he says.

"No," I say.

I strike him down.



ZU X ORI

Tai falls toward me.

He reaches out, placing his hand on the black cudgel, which shrinks down instantly into his palm. Then he topples sideways, out the open window.

I watch him hit the awning of the restaurant below. It collapses onto the diners on the sidewalk. Tai stumbles into the street, accosting a couple on a black scooter. "Pardon me," Tai points the cudgel at them. The couple backs away from the scooter.

I'm staring down at the pavement.

It's probably thirty feet.

Could I jump?

Without Tai, how do I bring back Zu? I feel our timelines splitting further.

With every second.

I leave the window and run down the stairs, hitting the street as Tai escapes on the black scooter.

On the sidewalk is Adagio.

I retrieve the sword.

I catch up quickly on my red Vespa. Tai is a half-block ahead.

LOVE AWAKENS

Tai finds me in his side mirror, whipping his head around. He takes a sharp right onto Greenwich. I accelerate directly behind him. We're on a one-way street, going the wrong way. Tai veers into the bike lane to avoid the oncoming traffic.

I'm right behind him.

He smashes backward with the black cudgel, shattering my headlight. I pull alongside him, blocking his next attack with Adagio.

A bicyclist is peddling toward us.

She swerves at the last instant.



Lucrezia watches her screen.

She's tracking Tai's avatar, which is suddenly moving rapidly, away from the Meatpacking District.

Toward her location.

The avatar pivots away, heading up a parallel street, increasing in speed.

"Go!" she tells the driver.

The driver looks confused.

"*Move, please—*" she pushes him out the door.

ZU X ORI

Lucrezia slides behind the wheel, accelerating quickly, one eye tracking Tai's movement on the screen. At the next intersection, she glances down the cross street.

She sees Tai on a black scooter.

For an instant.



ORI

We speed through an intersection.

Two vehicles cross our path. I attack with Adagio, smashing Tai's side mirror. He grabs my left arm.

I can't break his grip.

A large van heads straight toward us. It cuts a swath between us, horn blaring. Immediately we re-engage. Tai misses with his black cudgel, smashing my Vespa's rear fender.

I steer straight into his scooter.

We are shoulder to shoulder. I force Tai along a parked delivery truck, his black scooter scraping its length, the left mirror snapping off.

Tai rams me with his elbow.

LOVE AWAKENS

He raises the black cudgel high. It crashes down on Adagio, shattering my sword in two.

I'm left with a broken hilt.

Ahead of us, a cement truck is laboring through an intersection. We both brake.

But it's too late.

Our scooters go down, skidding along the pavement under the carriage of the truck. I slide to a stop, on the opposite side of the truck.

I can't tell if I'm hurt.

Tai lies on his back, ten feet away. His scooter is a black wreck. Between us is Adagio's broken hilt. I lift the jagged blade.

My body aches.

I take one step at a time.

Tai raises his head. I press the shard of Adagio to his exposed neck. Fragments of the time crossing reappear. We're on the dirt-caked earth of Verona.

Tybalt bleeds.

I'm about to kill him.

All I need to do is thrust.

ZU X ORI

"Zu," I say. "Tell me what to do."

"There's no going back," says Tai, wearily. "That's the point of Nepenthe."

My hand trembles on Adagio's hilt. Tai grins, looking ready to die. I imagine myself running the blade through his neck.

Why should I let him live?

Tai struggles to sit.

He moves his fingers onto the blade. The last time I killed Tai, it led to tragedy. It changed my whole destiny. I'm not doing that again.

I have a different timeline now.

I move the blade aside.

Tai lurches raggedly away, into traffic. A dark car stops in the intersection, a young woman with platinum hair behind the wheel.

She jumps out of the car.

Our eyes meet in a sudden, piercing gaze.

A strange sense of calm descends. Tai staggers past her, toward the car. But the woman holds my eyes.

There is something familiar.

LOVE AWAKENS

About this moment.

I remember the Castel San Pietro, the fortress overlooking Verona. Waiting to hear from Juliet. The girl who brought me Juliet's letter.

Her blue eyes, looking in mine.

These same eyes.

As now.

"Go well, Romeo—"

I hear her words.

I remember standing under the tree, her dress in the breeze. She was Juliet's friend!

But why is she with Tai?

The young woman looks at me, in rapt silence. But more than the past, it's a look of the future. As if she's seeing the future.

Hours, days, lifetimes.

Into the future.

A golden timeline. Appointments of destiny, lifetimes into the future.

ZU X ORI

Tai slumps in the passenger seat.

The girl with the platinum hair breaks our gaze. She gets in the car and drives away.



ZU

Hermes drives us downtown. "I can't believe Lauren loaned you her car," I say.

He grins at me.

"Just for today."

"I should have known," I place the sole of my shoe on the dashboard. "It's a conspiracy." I sip my bubble tea through the straw.

Hermes looks over at me.

"Do you really not remember anything?" he says.

"About?" I ask.

"Verona."

Hermes says it, seriously.

For a moment, I hold his gaze. I feel there's *something* important in what he's saying.

I avert my eyes, vaguely ashamed.

LOVE AWAKENS

Hermes' eyes return to the road.

"Parting is such sweet sorrow," he says, "that I shall say good night until tomorrow."

He glances at me, expectantly.

Hermes clears his throat.

"Wherefore art thou?" he says. "Romeo?"

I raise an eyebrow.

"Stop being weird," I say.

Hermes takes one hand from the wheel, pressing the touch screen. I hear a man and a woman, singing. If that's what you would call it.

"What's this?" I say.

"Opera."

"Because."

"I like Italian?" says Hermes.

I shake my head, incredibly. "You and Ori were made for each other," I say. I look over toward Hermes.

ZU X ORI

"Boba?" I offer.

I hold out my bubble tea.

Hermes sighs, but he takes my cup.

I turn away, staring out the window.

But the grasshopper.

*What was it about the grasshopper? The golden field,
stretching into the distance.*

Why do I see grasshoppers?

And why would I cry now, if I could?

I stare out the window.



Lucrezia drives with Tai beside her.

Her eyes look ahead, but barely see the road. *What just happened? That was Orion.* But there was something about him. It made me feel something. But so deeply, I don't know what.

What was that?

She looks over at Tai.

LOVE AWAKENS

Tai's face is bloody and bruised, his shirt torn. He sits silently, looking remote.

"Well," Lucrezia says. "That didn't go very well."



ORI

The studio looks like a bull ran loose.

I hardly believe what I'm seeing. The toppled tables and broken things of the studio are strewn over the floor. There's a smell of burning and the charred remains of the white dress.

Instantly I stop caring.

In the middle of the mess are Hermes and Zu.

Hermes saved the day, I rejoice.

Somehow he's reached Zu. Somehow Hermes broke through, woke her up.

Brought her back.

But quickly I see a different picture. Hermes appears deflated. He holds a plastic container of bubble tea. Zu appears as indifferent as this morning. She stands coolly detached.

ZU X ORI

As if she couldn't care.

"Zu!" I shout anyway.

She doesn't respond.

The two of them stand motionless, like odd twins. I'm still overwhelmed she's here. "Girlfriend had an accident," says Hermes, "with Nepenthe."

"I know," I say.

"You do?"

"Tai said so," I answer.

"Was he here?" Zu pipes up.

She's still wearing her black dress with the dark eyeshadow. It's an ominous look. "We had a little chat," Hermes says. "It's mostly her Verona memories that are affected." Zu's dark eyes observe me. We exchange a reserved, awkward glance.

Like with someone you used to know.

It hurts every time.

"I tried Shakespeare," says Hermes, "Italian opera, we even stopped for espresso. Smelling salts! Anything to trigger her memory!"

"I can't smell a thing," says Zu. She relaxes in a swivel chair, one foot on the ground.

LOVE AWAKENS

I kneel in front of the chair.

"Zu, what can you remember?" I say.

She eyes me suspiciously, like I've asked a trick question. I take a breath. "What can you remember *about us?*"

I try to clarify.

"About our Verona life," I say.

"Our Verona life?" Zu repeats, skeptically.

Our connection is completely absent.

Without our bond, we're just two people. Sure, we might even get along. But it wouldn't matter. We don't have a future without our past.

"Hermes—"

I turn, desperately.

But Hermes looks equally helpless.

"What happened in the Odyssey?" I say.

"Plenty," he looks at me.

"Nepenthe," I say obviously. "In the Odyssey. Did they ever remember their sorrow?"

"It only lasted a day," Hermes answers, knowingly. "But it was diluted in the wine."

ZU X ORI

Zu looks amused at our conversation.

I turn toward her.

“Zu, we have a past together—” I try explaining again, “and a future.”

I look into her dark eyes.

“Don’t I feel familiar to you?”

“Sure,” she says, “we met at Jack’s.”

“And?”

“And then I kissed you,” Zu stifles a smile.

“And then?” I’m hopeful.

Finally I feel we’re getting somewhere. Zu pauses, thoughtfully. “There was a car accident. I went to the hospital,” she says, slowly. She sounds like she’s remembering an event from years ago.

“What about the ambulance?” I ask urgently. “Do you remember what happened in the ambulance?”

Zu looks puzzled.

“Not really,” she looks at me.

Zu sits there idly. She puckers her mouth and swivels around once in a slow circle.

I’m losing patience.

LOVE AWAKENS

I feel my body stiffening from the fight with Tai. I'm reminded how Hermes helped me retrieve my Verona instincts. Could we do the same for Zu?

Could we retrieve Zu's past?

"Hermes, can you help?"

"I'm *trying*, Ori."

"I mean retrieve her memory!"

"I can't do it."

"Why not?"

"Your connection is between the two of you," Hermes says simply.

I turn around.

"Zu—" I look in her eyes. "Do you want to remember?" She looks at me tentatively.

Zu meets my eyes.

"Sure," she says.

"You're going to have to trust me," I say. "Do you trust me?" Again Zu looks carefully into my eyes.

"I do," she says cautiously.

I'm remembering last night's retrieval. How Hermes initiated it.

ZU X ORI

By connecting me to my anger.

"You need to think of something," I say, "I mean *feel something*—that relates to your past," I tell Zu. "Can you do that?"

"I don't know," Zu hesitates.

"What about Verona?" I suggest. "Can you feel anything about Verona? How you felt living there? How you felt in your parents' house?"

Zu's eyes search. "No."

"What about me?" I say quickly. "Meeting on your balcony—or when you woke up, in the tomb?"

Zu makes a strange face.

"What am I doing wrong?" I say.

I turn to Hermes.

"Keep going," he says.

I remember back to last night. I hear Hermes telling me to follow my feelings, like a magic thread, all the way into my past.

Oh, that's my mistake!

I've started at the wrong end. With things Zu no longer remembers. We need to start with what she *does* remember.

LOVE AWAKENS

What she *does* feel.

If anything.

"The car accident," I turn to Zu. "What were you feeling before the accident?"

This time I've connected.

I see a flicker in Zu's eyes, something in her gaze changing. Awakening. "It was about you," her eyes narrow, remembering. "And me."

Now she's feeling. I know she feels this.

I can feel the retrieval beginning. The shape of the studio is beginning to shift. The brick walls are becoming transparent.

"What were you feeling?" I continue.

"Love," she says, surprised.

Her eyes deepen, glistening. The studio walls are quickly disappearing. Old Verona is taking shape around us. We're outside a large stone house. A hint of stars appears above the translucent studio ceiling. "I think—" Zu struggles. "I think we're at my house."

We're half in the studio, half in Verona.

"Someone's coming," says Zu.

I hear a woman's voice: "*Juliet!*"

ZU X ORI

The stone house is taking form. Lush flowers weave along a trellis above our heads. "My heart is beating," Zu says. "I feel excited."

"What else do you feel?"

Zu squints, as if her vision is blurry. "I—" she says, uncertainly, "I don't feel anything else."

The retrieval is beginning to reverse.

Alarmingly, I watch the stone house and stars fading away. The solid, brick walls of the studio are returning. "That's okay," I say, trying to keep calm. "Stay with it. What you were feeling about us?"

Zu shakes her head.

"It's gone," she says. The stone house is a rapidly retreating memory, beyond the studio walls. We're quickly losing our link to Verona.

I seize Zu's hand in mine.

"Let me help," I say.

Zu grips my hand instinctively. I restart the retrieval, using my own feelings as the thread. The process feels easier, every time I engage it.

Like a path I've walked before.

LOVE AWAKENS

Immediately, the studio walls soften. With our hands locked together, the stone house reappears once again. This time it's more rapid, more visceral. I experience the sharp sounds, the sweet odors and colors of a party in Verona, five hundred years ago. The canopy of stars is brighter than any I remember. Only the faintest outline of the Gansevoort studio remains.

"Are you with me?"

Zu nods.

The stone house is completely solid. We're below the wooden trellis, overlooking the gardens. My heart is racing, someone is coming. My arms are covered in fine, 16th-century cloth.

But Zu looks the same.

The same as in New York City.

She wears the same black dress. The same dark eyeshadow. And the appearance of her skin, here in Verona, is transparent. She can't enter into the past. She's stuck in the present.

I grip her hand tightly.

"Zu, you need to *feel* this," I say desperately. "You need to feel what happened!"

ZU X ORI

Everything depends on this.

"I *can't*."

"Try!"

Zu holds my gaze and hand.

But I feel Nepenthe blocking her. Someone is approaching from the house, searching for us. I feel the rush of this moment, our first meeting. I try to pull Zu toward me, into the past, with my cloth-covered arms. But her hands are disappearing.

I can no longer hold them.

Her gaze drifts lower.

"I can't feel it," she resigns.

Instantly, the images of the stone house, the garden flowers, and the party begin packing up. The ceiling replaces the beautiful sky, and the brick walls block out the Verona night. Zu and I sit facing each other, in our street clothes.

The retrieval is over.

It failed.

I sit back, shaken. Zu unclasps her hand from mine. I feel I'm sitting opposite a stranger. Zu gazes at me with as much feeling as a glass of water.

LOVE AWAKENS

I look ahead, stunned.

"I'm sorry," she says, apologizing for me. "I know you wanted that to work."

She turns to Hermes.

"Can we go now?"

I'm shocked. We can't end this way.

Not after everything.

Not like this.

I get up, grabbing a vase of flowers. I toss out the flowers, throwing the water on Zu's face.

"Ah, wha-?" she sputters. "Seriously?"

She gasps in shocked surprise.

Zu lowers her head, breathing. Was a shock all she needed? Hermes and I lean forward, eagerly. "Do you feel any differently?" I ask.

"Yeah, I'm wet," Zu reacts angrily.

She grabs her backpack. "Have a nice afternoon," she says, barely acknowledging me. She heads across the studio toward the door.

I'm left with Hermes.

Something inside me snaps.



I catch her in the stairwell.

I hardly know what I'm doing. I grab Zu by the hand. She pulls back sharply, but I don't let go. I start up the stairwell, pulling Zu behind me.

She's shouting something.

I don't hear her words.

We ascend the stairs, crashing against the concrete walls. Zu pulls backward against me.

But I don't stop.

I throw open the door to the roof. The sunlight blazes into us. I step through the door.

Zu has a wild look in her eyes. I cross the bare rooftop, dragging Zu behind me. I feel enraged and crazed. Like there's nothing left to do. Zu resists, beating at my arms and my chest, my head.

"Let go!" she is yelling. "Let go of me!"

I keep moving, forward.

I sense what I'm about to do.

But it's too terrible to say.

We cross the rooftop, battling.

LOVE AWAKENS

I head straight for the ledge. "What are you going to do?" Zu practically dares me. "Throw us off?"

"Why not?" I shout back.

The ledge is twenty feet away.

I drag us onward.

"Go ahead," Zu cries out. "I can't remember, okay? Whatever it is you want me to feel—I don't feel it," Zu is nearly crying. "So just do it!"

I shut my eyes, moving toward the ledge.

I look straight down, to the black cars below. We've done this before. We died before, when there was no more hope. What's so different now?

We can't live like this.

We know how to do this.

The past repeats, said Lauren.

I stand on the narrow raised ledge. Zu no longer resists me. She looks into the street. The roof drops three stories straight down. All we have to do is jump.

I'm not afraid.

We've done this before.

ZU X ORI

I hold Zu's hand, tenderly. One more step is all we need. My weight would send us over. I'm picturing it happening. The two of us falling, hand in hand. I'm staring down into the street. The pavement feels so close. It would only take a second.

Then we'd be together.

Again.

"I'm sorry," Zu is crying. *"I'm sorry, I can't remember!"*

We can't live like this.

The past repeats, said Lauren.

I step gently forward, along the ledge. Toward the corner of the building. Zu steps backward, looking in my eyes the whole time. We're nearing the corner.

She isn't fighting anymore.

Zu nods her head slowly.

Without words.

Her eyeshadow is smeared. Her eyes try to reach me, but behind some veil. Behind Nepenthe. I feel I'm watching someone underwater, sinking slowly out of sight. Her lips move, but no words come out. Every step quickens my resolve. The corner is ten feet away.

I push us toward it.

LOVE AWAKENS

The sunlight blinds our eyes. I hear horns from the street below. We're in this together. I can see it behind Zu's eyes. She can't remember.

But somehow she agrees.

"Do it, Ori," she whispers.

We've reached the corner. I see the intersection below on both sides.

"Do it," she says.

I don't hesitate.

I take another step, Zu steps backward.

A cluster of pigeons bursts up above us. Zu swivels, avoiding the birds.

Her foot misses the ledge.

Zu's knee crashes upon the ledge. Her weight pulls me down, toward her. Toward the intersection below. I collide into Zu on the corner of the ledge. We're smashed together at the edge of the building.

It's our last chance.

I kiss Zu, with everything I have.

The streets are still moving, below us. But we have stopped. Every hope and memory of the past and future is

ZU X ORI

passing between our locked lips. The Capulet garden in Verona appears one last time.

I am there with Zu.

But something has changed.

Zu is dressed in her black dress, but she's no longer transparent. Her skin is the color of flesh.

We look on each other, like newborns. Our eyes have never known love before. In the warm floral night, we tremble in the garden.

One of us reaches out.

In Verona, I am kissing Zu.

For the first time.

The New York skyline is fading fast. Below the rooftops, the traffic starts and stops and starts again. Lights wink on across the city.

In the Capulet garden, something is happening. My hands hold firmly on Zu's dress. But the fabric below my fingers is changing. It's no longer modern, no longer black. I feel the softness of Juliet's purple silk dress. Zu's hands press warmly into mine. Our lips are sealed.

This is where we began.

We are, as we were.

LOVE AWAKENS

On the Gansevoort rooftop, time passes. The moon arcs upward in the sky, a pale reflection on the river. I am kissing Zu on the rooftop.

Something is surfacing, inside her.

I feel Zu's fingers around my neck. Her body shakes, like she's gasping for air. Like she's rising from the dead. But Nepenthe won't let go. I feel Zu being torn in two, between forgetfulness and memory. She's somewhere between drowning and gasping for life.

Between a wail and roar.

In Verona, one whole second has passed. If time even passes at all. I am kissing Zu in the garden, in her purple silk dress. Back in New York City, the lights checker the night. The traffic races through the streets below, in trailing red and white lights.

Slowly the lights come to a stop.

Our kiss comes to an end. Beyond us is the green garden in the night, forever innocent. This moment, saved in the Verona stars.

We are, as we were.



EPISODE 11 **FORGIVENESS**

TAI

I remember that day.

It was a normal day, in every other way. I was in the backseat, gazing forward through the windows, as my father drove.

My mother sat beside my father, talking. I listened to their voices from the backseat. But today, their voices seemed more distant.

I had just been told I was adopted.

FORGIVENESS

A thin canopy of trees covered the winding road, the sharp mountains in the distance. My mother was turning her head to me.

The accident happened so fast.

Was it the car beside us? I no longer remember what happened. I only remember after the impact. The broken windshield. The smell of rubber, chemicals, oil. Of burnt plastic.

The smell of blood.

It was suddenly quiet.

I sat in the backseat, alone.

My parents did not move. I remember all of this. My mother's head hung down, her beautiful hair over her shoulders, as always, as the blood streaked down the side of her face.

I shouted at her.

My voice was so loud, in the silence.

I believe I scared myself.

Because I should have kept shouting. That would have been normal. But instead I became quiet, and I just stared at the two of them, the two dead people who had always loved me.

ZU X ORI

Who I thought had been my parents.

I stayed unmoving, a patch of forest around the car, until the police arrived.

I didn't even undo my seat belt.



I went to live with my uncle.

I was taken to the grounds where he lived, in a chauffeur driven car. I sat in the backseat, alone. My uncle's residence was a grand building, with two large wings. It seemed like a palace to me.

My uncle greeted me.

I remember his words.

He placed his bony hand on my shoulder, and said, "This is your new home, Tai."

And he took me inside.

This would be my home, for the next seven years.

My uncle was well-known for running a distinguished perfume business. His name was Fang An. And his company was called Zhu Perfume.

Which I got to know, intimately.

FORGIVENESS

I had never been much interested in perfume, despite my keen sense of smell. But at my uncle's home, it was all anyone spoke about. The different fragrances, what they meant, how they should be used.

It was like a religion.

What perfume meant to life.

Inevitably, what was always said was, "*perfume helps us to remember.*"

But I did not want to remember.



I began my training.

On top of my regular schooling, in which perfection was expected, I studied with my fragrance instructor, Li, several hours a day.

Colorless liquids were placed in front of me.

I was expected to name them. And not only their names, but their attributes and relationships. Punishment for failure was swift. A stern scolding for my first mistake. A wooden spatula for my second.

And worse for a third.

ZU X ORI

But they achieved their result. At a young age, I became something of a prodigy in the art of fragrance. My uncle was very proud of me.

But not always.

One particular night, we met together in the ornate perfume hall. I was to create my own fragrance, ideally resembling one of the Zhu masterpieces. My uncle and Li stood by, watching attentively.

I began with ambergris and vanilla, and a bit of tonka bean to round it off. I saw their faces brighten, as they sniffed the preparation.

I was doing as I had been taught.

But I had learned other things too.

On my own.

I retrieved the trial perfume from Li. To this, I added a brush of starflower. I knew what this would do. I had noticed that certain fragrances could mask the powerful memory effects of perfume.

I was excited by this.

But my instructor's face went blank.

"No, Tai," said Li. "We want to evoke memories, not make them go away." By his tone, I knew he meant the

FORGIVENESS

conversation was over. My uncle stared at me harshly, but did not speak.

I debated my next move.

“But why?”

“That is our way—” my uncle interjected. “For centuries, the Zhu perfumes have allowed people to remember what they have forgotten.”

“Maybe,” I protested, “it’s time for a new way.”

My uncle’s face turned granite. I had crossed a line. He dragged me to the washing room of the servants, where I was beaten with a black rod.

Again.

And again.

Until I bled.

So I had another memory to forget.

But also a new motivation.



On my fifteenth birthday, I learned my uncle’s company had purchased the famous House of Capulet. It was a celebratory day in my uncle’s house.

ZU X ORI

I was to be sent to Verona.

To eventually take over.

My uncle called me into his study.

"Tai, this is a great honor," he said warmly. "We have a long history with the House of Capulet. We'll be entrusting you with an important position."

I stood quietly, but proudly.

"Are you aware," my uncle eyed me, carefully, "of the prophecy?"

My eyes widened.

So the rumors were true!

"You mean, about Juliet Capulet," I said, trying to sound knowledgeable, "and the red perfume." That was our name for the fabled past-life perfume. The ageless goal of the Capulets and Zhus.

"Yes," my uncle nods.

He folded his hands together.

"But Juliet won't find us on her own," he told me. "She will need to be guided."

"How?" I am confused.

"By someone close to her."

FORGIVENESS

My uncle leaned back in his chair. "I have watched you closely—for many years—Tai," he said. "But there's something I need to know."

"Anything, uncle."

My uncle laughed, once.

He opened his desk drawer, slowly. "Unfortunately, you can't tell me, Tai," he said. "Because you don't know." He placed an antique bottle of red liquid on the desk. "Because you don't remember."

"Is that the red perfume?" I gaped.

"An imperfect version."

I stood speechless. Until this meeting, I hadn't been sure the red perfume existed. The grail of all memory perfumes, it was more of a myth than reality.

The red bottle was pushed toward me.

"Would you like to try it?"

I froze.

I had heard all the warnings, of course. Of insanity, and worse, for those who inhaled the red perfume. But I also had a personal fear.

I was afraid to remember my past.

"Respectfully, uncle," I said, "I decline."

ZU X ORI

A violent flash of anger crossed my uncle. I had seen this in him before. "Don't be selfish, Tai," he shamed me. "Put your family before yourself."

"No—uncle."

I was terrified of my past.

"You refuse me?" he said, furiously.

My uncle stepped around his desk, surprising me with his agility. "Disrespectful person!" he shouted. "After everything this family has given you." He grabbed my head, pushing me to the floor.

My uncle opened the red bottle.

He forced it to my nose.

"You *will* remember," he said.

And I did.

Painfully.



I liked Verona, immediately.

Of course by then, I understood why. But it didn't really matter. When you are home, you're home.

FORGIVENESS

Even though my memories were unfortunate, I still took pleasure in returning to the places I had enjoyed, so long ago. In particular, the fountain in the Piazza della Erbe. Where I once played.

Also, I could now work on my own, without my uncle and Li watching over me. I felt others were beginning to see me, and respect me, for myself.

And I had chosen a color.

For my perfume.

Green.



In one of our video conferences, my uncle surprised me. "Tai," he said. "We've hired someone to work with you. She'll be leading our memory work."

Immediately the door opened.

A girl with dark brown hair entered. She walked up to me, glancing in my eyes, momentarily.

"This is Lucrezia," said my uncle.

"I prefer Lu," she said.

ZU X ORI

"We've selected her," my uncle continued proudly, "after a long search. From now on, you'll work together. She will be your assistant."

We regard each other, sideways.

"As you know, Tai," said my uncle, "I'm not fond of your oblivion perfume. But I'm going to allow it. In return for bringing Juliet back."

I looked down at the floor.

"I've heard you remember your past," Lucrezia said to me. "I would like to, also."

I inhaled shortly.

I never liked being reminded of this.

"Don't be so sure," I said.



LAUREN

I hurry up the Gansevoort stairs.

I've brought Kimmo with me, after she came to my classroom, worried about Zu. Hermes has been messaging me all afternoon.

FORGIVENESS

About my car, opera and Shakespeare. Nepenthe and bubble tea. His statements don't make sense.

It all makes me anxious.

The lock on the door is smashed. I walk in, with Kimmo right behind me. The studio lies in shambles. Orion and Zu stand in the middle of the room.

With blank expressions.



ZU

Orion and I face the others.

We look like zombies after the apocalypse. Ori's shoulder is matted and caked with blood, a maroon stain sits on his sleeve. My black eyeshadow is smeared down my face. I am missing a shoe.

A half dozen eyes are searching us. Lauren and Kimmo stand in the doorway, Hermes is on the sofa.

Neither Ori or I say a word.

I exhale, taking a deep breath.

From across the studio, I smell the jasmine scent of Kimmo's presence, the sweet dry cloth of cotton, the metal

ZU X ORI

electricity of the overhead lighting, and the slow humid air wafting in the windows.

I breathe in Ori's pewter sandalwood.

And dozens of other scents.

Behind each one is a memory. At once, I'm reminded of my first visit to Ori's studio, and of lunches in elementary school. Of meeting Ori.

In Verona.

Every fragrance is a memory.

Lauren comes up to me, uncertainly. "Lauren," I smile at her, "you smell like roses."

"You can smell again?" says Lauren.

"Yeah," I say.

"How?"

"Ori brought me back," I say simply. I take another breath. "He made me feel again."

I'm still adjusting.

I'm halfway between the slow-motion time of Verona and the normal present. But something of Verona has returned with me. There's a starry purple glitter, hovering around Orion and I.

FORGIVENESS

I can't actually see it. But I can feel it.

The others are gathering closer. Hermes is holding a dustpan and broom.

I can't believe I'm back.

Or that I went away.

Everything is back. Ori and Verona. My memories, my love. For everything. For Orion.

Like waking from a dream.

A dream without love.

We stand together, in the starry glitter.

"Nepenthe isn't just about forgetting," I explain to Lauren. "It stops you from *loving*. If you can't *feel* anything—you can't love anyone!"

If only I had known.

I'd never have been tempted.

"So what are you gonna do?" asks Kimmo.

"About what?"

"Nepenthe—"

I hadn't considered doing anything. I've barely made it back myself. "Doesn't it come out tomorrow?" Kimmo says, awkwardly.



ORI

I turn toward Zu.

Our starry Verona dust still lingers. "There's one more thing," I say, "we need to do."

She replies, without thinking.

"I know."

"You do?"

"The Lights," she says.

I feel our connection in her words. We're on the same page.

Lauren turns toward us, overhearing.

"It's tomorrow night, you know," she says.

I am watching Lauren, carefully.

She steps forward, eagerly, "If you're thinking about it, I could save you a spot. If you like," Lauren holds out both her hands, outstretched.

I am seeing something.

Slowly.

FORGIVENESS

I know that gesture. The outstretched hands, but from where? From when?

Something about today has opened my vision. The time crossing with Tai, the retrieval with Zu. My sensitivity has grown.

There's something about the gesture.

I've seen that gesture.

So many times.

It feels so familiar. But why? In my mind, I see a figure in a robe, *hands outstretched. Just like Lauren.*

Oh my God.

I can't believe what I'm seeing. It all makes sense. Of course. Of course.

Of course!

A hundred memories flash through my mind, from Verona to New York City. All at once, I am connecting all the dots.

"Just let me know," says Lauren, "how I can help."

I'm caught off guard by my anger.

I step toward Lauren. "I think you've helped enough," I interrupt her. "None of this would have happened—without your help."

ZU X ORI

"What do you mean?" Lauren sounds shocked.

I try to keep calm. But I can't.

"Yesterday in the park," I point out. "You told Zu to talk with Tai."

"I was just—"

"Look what happened!"

"Ori—" Zu says calmly, "it's fine."

"No, *it's not*—"

Everyone has fallen silent.

"I was just trying to help," Lauren explains.

"You always try to help—" I burst out. I still can't believe what I've seen. If I wasn't so angry, I would be in tears. "You almost destroyed us! And it's not the first time."

"What are you saying?" says Lauren.

"Don't you see?" I turn to everyone. I'm overcome by what I've seen. "Everything that happened—in Verona—she's responsible, she's to blame!"

"How?" Zu demands.

Hermes steps toward me.

"Ori," he warns me.

FORGIVENESS

"She was there—" I ignore him. "The idea for Mantua, the sleeping potion, the botched plan—"

"Ori, stop—" says Hermes.

"No."

I stare at Zu.

"She needs to know what she's done."

"*Stop, Ori—*"

"She was there," I say. "She was the priest!"

"You're breaking the Prime Law!"

"I don't care!" I shout.

Lauren hasn't moved.

She's beyond pale, almost transparent. She doesn't just seem devastated. She looks destroyed.

But I'm too angry to stop.

"We've been blaming ourselves," I say to Zu. "For dying. But it wasn't all our fault."

Zu looks deadly serious. She stands there, digesting what I've said.

"No one put a knife in my hands," she says sternly.

"But someone gave you a sleeping potion," I say, "someone sent me away to Mantua, and someone forget to

ZU X ORI

tell me the plan! We trusted her, and she completely let us down!"

The studio is absolutely silent.

"You ruin everything," I turn to Lauren "You think you're being helpful, but you're not!"

"Ori—" Zu shouts. "That's enough!"

"We don't need you here!" I shout at Lauren. I can't control what I'm feeling.

Lauren is retreating, backing away from me.

Backing toward the door.

"Go!" I shout.

"Ori—" Zu pulls me backward.

Lauren's eyes are welling up. She moves shakily toward the studio door. I pursue her, then stop. The door bangs shut behind her.



LAUREN

I am almost crying.

By the time I reach my car.

FORGIVENESS

I fumble with the headlights, quickly driving away. I don't know where I'm going.

I don't care.

I can hear my breathing.

But Ori was right.

I ruined everything.

I know this. I know it from the dream. The wedding dream. Was I the priest?

Was I?

I don't know.

But I know I am responsible.

I tried to help them, I tried. But I ruined everything. I ruined everything for them.

I come to a stop at a red light.

I lean forward, sobbing.



ZU

Ori is collapsed on his knees.

He's by the door, his face covered by his hands. I can't tell if he's crying or not. But it feels like he's grieving. For everything that happened.

I stand beside him.

"That was too harsh," I say.

For the moment, I have no other words. What Ori has said is completely shocking. But it also feels *true*. I picture my drawing of the robed figure. The figure with their hands outstretched. Just like Lauren.

Now it makes sense.

I feel deeply silent, for what I now know. About someone I care about. About my teacher. The robed friar in Verona. Lauren.

I lay my hand on Ori's shoulder.

"It's okay, Ori," I say.

I sit down beside him.

After a while, I say: "Let's take a walk."

FORGIVENESS

Ori raises his head, his eyes unguarded. We stand up gradually. Ori follows me to the studio entrance. We start down the stairs, together.

Slowly.

Without speaking.

I can hear our footsteps, on the stairs.

We're looking at each other.

With each step.

I'm about to say something.

To ask how he's feeling.

But it doesn't feel right.

Not yet.

We're still in the starry dust.

Ori and I.

So instead.

We descend the stairs.

Together.

Eyes locked.

Growing closer again, with every step.

Just our starry eyes and dust.

ZU X ORI

That immortal, starry dust. That was with us in Verona.
That's with us now.

Ori's expression is changing.

His grief is falling away.

Step by step.

Ori is coming back to me.

We round the landing of the second floor. A shadow of
a smile escapes Ori's lips.

And mine.

We keep descending.

Steadily.

Step after step.

Each step, like a tone.

In some timeless music.

Orion smiles silently. The grief and sadness are letting
go. We've turned the page.

Our eyes and the starry dust.

Now there's no chance.

Of speaking.

There's so much more here.

FORGIVENESS

Without words.

Our eyes are speaking for us. Of centuries and places,
of moments and magic.

Of trials.

And trust.

Step by step.

As always.

A woman is passing us, ascending the stairway. She
glances at us, but our eyes don't move.

We remain among the stardust.

Like children.

I am smiling so easily, now.

As is Ori.

We've reached the front entrance.

I open it, without looking away. We squeeze through
the doorway together.

Outside the doors, the wrought iron buildings of
Gansevoort Street frame the night. The streets and
pedestrians go about their business. But somehow, quietly,
existing in another world.

Outside of us.

ZU X ORI

Orion and I walk along the sidewalk.

We pass the restaurant, the evening diners at their tables. Toward the corner.

"Hey look—" I point ahead.

Ori gazes forward.

"My shoe!"

I skip toward it, raising it triumphantly. Ori reaches me, eyes shining.

I slip it on, excitedly.

Across the street is the High Line. Where this all began, a few mornings ago. We stand gazing upward.

"She cares about us," I say, "so much."

"I know," Ori closes his eyes.

We stand there together.

"I just couldn't believe it," Ori says. "I just couldn't believe it."

I watch the moonlight shining down.

"Do you still wanna do it?" I ask.

"The Lights?" says Ori.

I nod.

Ori looks in thought.

FORGIVENESS

"Hermes calls it a timeline," he says.

I look toward him.

"When there's something you need to do," he says. "To become who you are."

I turn away, looking ahead.

"More than meeting again?" I say.

I feel the starry dust around us.

Ori doesn't answer.

Quietly I remember the Tavern, under the amber lights, talking to Orion there. What seems ages ago, but was only yesterday.

I remember us both, like a dream:

I have a story to tell, I say

What's it about?

I think it's our story

You can tell it at The Lights

But it's already been told, I say

Not to the end

I don't know what that means

ZU X ORI

I'll help you, he says

I look at Ori now.

"It's still scary," I say.

"Well," Ori is looking at me. "What feels scarier? Doing it or not doing it?"

"Doing it!" I blurt out.

We both laugh.

"And what feels right?"

"Doing it."

I turn to Ori.

"Together," I add.

Ori smiles calmly.

"I think," he says, "that was always the plan."

The starry dust shimmers.

And I have the feeling:

What we do at The Lights is as important as meeting each other. What we do together.

FORGIVENESS

Somehow.

"So, a timeline," I confirm.

Ori is silent.

"What's at the end of it?" I ask.

"We are."

Ori looks in my eyes. "Hopefully."

I feel like I'm seeing our future. The Lights, tomorrow and beyond. A series of days, each building upon the last. Building upon our past.



In a flash, I see the black storm.

From my vision of the blue perfume. Somehow it's still here. Even now. I see it blackening the sky. Then it's gone. How is my vision still here? After my accident with Nepenthe and everything else?

Because I chose Orion. It's because I chose Orion. My vision was about what happens if I chose Orion.

I see someone—it's Orion, dead inside a circle.

ZU X ORI

I see my future with Orion.

Both.

But how can that be?

As if Orion's death and our future follow the same timeline. How can that be?

I take Ori's hand.



HERMES

Kimmo strolls up to me.

I'm standing in front of the windows. "Hermes, I know you know. What was all that about?" she asks me curiously. "With Ori and Lauren?"

I look at Kimmo, deeply.

"History," I say.



FORGIVENESS

ZU

We ascend the stairs to the High Line. The moonlight casts its long shadows ahead of us. Without Nepenthe, the world feels sharp and alive again.

We lean against a railing.

I see the roof of Ori's building.

"That's a long way down," I reflect.

Ori gazes to the pavement below. He doesn't say anything. I edge toward him, my hair falling around our faces, our noses brushing.

Ori looks through my hair.

"How did you bring me back?" I ask.

"It's called retrieval," he says. "When a feeling retrieves your past. Hermes taught me."

I'm noticing Ori feels different now.

He's the same enchanting, beautiful person. But something has happened. Now he seems more solid, somehow, more dangerous.

We stroll along the High Line.

We're nearing the place, where three mornings ago, I kissed Orion.

ZU X ORI

I release his hand.

There's something I need to say.

I don't want to, but I have to.

I take a deep breath, then exhale. "I kissed someone," I confess, turning to gauge his reaction. "I think you should know."

Ori stops instantly.

"What?" he says.

My stomach does a flip.

"Landon."

I close my eyes.

Ori can't believe it.

I stand my ground, my limbs tense.

We've never had a situation like this. I feel Ori could do anything, from breaking down, to smashing a hole in the pavement, to walking away from me.

Forever.

"It was Nepenthe—" I say.

I'm not making an excuse. But I want to explain. "I tried to find you, but then we went dancing, and—it happened." I hold my breath, preparing for the worst.

FORGIVENESS

I consider apologizing.

But I don't.

I'm not sure why.

Ori hasn't even moved.

His eyes drift toward the ground.

"I wish it didn't happen," I say regretfully. "But it did. I can't pretend it didn't." I know I have to tell Ori the entire truth. Because that's who I want to be now.

But Ori walks away from me.

And looks across the river.

I wait for him to speak. Between us, the purple stardust still hovers, faintly. But Ori feels like ice.

Is this how a timeline dies?

In a quiet, turning away.

I see Ori dead inside a circle.

I see the black storm.

I can't stand the silence.

"Will you say something?" I speak out.

ZU X ORI

Orion's back is toward me. He stands stone-like, looking away from me.

"Landon," he says.

He turns toward me, coming near. He's in front of me, looking deeply into my eyes. It's so intense. I don't know what's going to happen.

"You kissed Landon?"

I nod, carefully.

Ori draws his lips tight, as if deciding how to respond, then breaks into laughter. I watch Ori laughing. I'm not sure how to respond.

I don't know what this means.

Ori is laughing.

"I'm imagining him saying my lines," he says. I breathe, ever so quietly.

I'm not sure why.

But I think I feel forgiven.



FORGIVENESS

ZU

Kimmo and Hermes turn toward us. They're both holding broomsticks like swords. "Ah you're back," says Hermes. "We were just getting started."

"I have an idea," I announce.

I walk past Hermes, straight to my backpack.

I've been holding this idea, all the way from the High Line. I haven't even told Orion yet.

I take out my tablet.

Hermes begins to say something.

"Wait—"

I hold up my hand.

Quietly, I drift away from the others.

I sketch rapidly, trying to capture as much of my idea as I can. Before I possibly forget. I feel a sparkle in my eye. In the starry dust, this idea arrived.

What if.

I could tell my own story?

All over again.

But it's already been told, I said

ZU X ORI

Not to the end

What would that look like?

I finish the sketch.

Hit save.

Then I start a second sketch.

I'm drawing in a different way now. Than the faces and imaginations from my Verona past. I feel I'm shaping these drawings myself, rather than remembering them. Shaping them out of myself.

I pause a moment, savoring this.

Then smile.

My hand traces out what I'm imagining, what I already see in my mind.

Save.

There's one more.

I want to do.

"Zu—"

My name startles me. I see Kimmo, who's come up beside me. "About Nepenthe—"

"Not now—"

FORGIVENESS

I turn away, toward a deserted place in the room. I'm unsure what this last drawing is. But without it, the first two make no sense.

They depend on the third.

I drift on, then stop.

My eyes close.

Oh, now I can see it.

I restrain an impulse to break down. Because it touches me to the core. Because it's what could have been.

If only.

I take a breath.

And draw.



ORI

Zu returns to us. She strides toward Hermes, flashing her tablet. "Can you do this?" she asks.

Hermes looks puzzled.

"As a hologram," she says.

ZU X ORI

"Oh," says Hermes, eyeing the drawings. He looks at Zu, then again at the sketches on the tablet. "I can do it," he says earnestly.

"Can I see too?" I say.

I am handed the tablet.

Zu meets my eyes gently.

"What do you think?" she asks, delicately.

I swipe though the drawings.

"For The Lights?"

She nods silently.

I purse my lips. I'm briefly left without a response. "Do you understand?" asks Zu.

"Of course."

Kimmo grabs the tablet from me. Her eyes dart from one drawing to the next, puzzled. "And these mean something to you all?" she asks us.

The three of us look toward her.

But no one speaks.



It's late in the night.

FORGIVENESS

I find Hermes working at his laptop. Across the room, a demo of his hologram flickers in and out. Hermes glances up at me, over his screen.

"I made a mistake," I say slowly. "Telling Lauren about her past."

Hermes inhales deeply.

"Yeah you did."

I eye him, cautiously.

"What are the consequences of breaking the Prime Law?" I ask, shyly.

Hermes raises his eyebrows.

He ruffles his hair, thinking.

"You're responsible for everything that happens to Lauren because of what you revealed. All the bad and all the good, every pain that Lauren suffers because of your actions—as well as every joy—you will feel as your own, until the end of time."

There's a long pause.

"Oh, that's it?" I say.

Hermes covers his eyes.

"Bro," he says, light-hearted.

ZU X ORI

I feel he forgives me.

"It's happened before," says Hermes. "And it'll happen again."

He fiddles with the holograms, for a few moments. There's something else on his mind.

"I have something to say too," he stops working.

Hermes can't quite begin.

This is unusual. I've never seen Hermes at a loss for words. "What happened in Verona," he begins.

He looks down.

"It was my fault too—" he says. "I goaded Tybalt into fighting," Hermes looks at me deeply. "I started the fight that got you banished."

His voice is filled with remorse.

"Oh, Hermes," I say.

"It could have been different," Hermes opens up, his eyes downcast, "if it wasn't for me. I was too headstrong. Maybe you wouldn't have died. Or Juliet either. It could have been a different story."

"You don't know that."

Hermes stares at his keyboard.

FORGIVENESS

He feels so different from Verona. Hermes has a sensitivity than Mercutio never had. It makes me wonder how he changed.

"I'm sorry," he says simply.

I sit down beside him.

After a moment, he returns to his program. We sit there together, the moon outside.



TAI

The morning arrives, in cold light.

I wake alone in my hotel room.

For a few brief moments, I'm graced with amnesia. I have no memory of who or where I am. Or anything that's happened to me.

It's a moment of bliss.

Then as always, I remember.

Orion's blade at my neck.

Humiliated.

Zu running away from me.

Again.

ZU X ORI

I try to rise from bed, but I'm too sore. I return to lying on my back.

At least I broke Adagio.

Ended that shame.

Yes I killed Mercutio, and Romeo killed me.

I struggle from the sheets, crossing the room to the bathroom mirror. My eye is bruised.

My face is scratched. The side of my torso is scraped from the scooter crash.

I put on a clean, black shirt.

Today is a special day. The launch of Nepenthe. The day I have worked toward, all these years.

I try to look happy.



ZU

The morning arrives, in warm light.

I wake on the sofa, with Ori beside me. Quietly I cross the room. Along the wall is a large mirror, nearly the height of the wall. I see a girl with messy purple hair and black smudgy eyes.

FORGIVENESS

I step closer to the mirror.

With a damp cloth, I wipe the dark smudges from my face. Beneath my hair, my eyes look back at me. I throw on one of Orion's hoodies.

I return to Ori on the sofa.

He opens his eyes.

"I have to go now," I say.

"Why?" he says, sleepily.

"Kimmo was right. I'm the only one who can stop Nepenthe." I know Ori won't like this.

"No."

"I have to," I say.

"We have The Lights."

"I'll be back," I reassure him. I think again to three days ago. How much my life has changed. "No one else knows Tai," I say gently. "He was my brother."

"I know," says Ori.

I kiss him on the lips. I stand up, walking toward the doorway. I spot Ori's scooter key.

"Oh," I say. "Can I take it?"

Ori covers his face with a cushion.

ZU X ORI

Outside, a growing cloud cover is quickly rolling in, eclipsing the sunlight. But I won't allow myself to think about the black storm. About our future.

I won't indulge my fears.



ZU

I park Ori's damaged scooter.

A drop of rain splashes my face. I start toward the glass Capulet store, watching the first raindrops dot the grey pavement. I flip up my hoodie, observing the sky without stopping.

It's too late to stop.

I'm learning destiny only has one direction.

Forward.

There's a long, winding line outside the Capulet store, stretching around the block. I even spot a small tent. Is this the line for Nepenthe?

I start to doubt myself.

If all these people want Nepenthe, who I am to say that's wrong?

FORGIVENESS

But I remember what happened.

I think of the unfeeling blankness. The distance from Ori and from myself. The many destinies that may never happen. The many futures missed.

It makes me furious.

These people don't know that.

They've only seen the Capulet's clever marketing campaign. That Nepenthe is next to happiness.

That oblivion is bliss.

I walk toward the glass door.

Strips of black tape cover the crack left by my wine bottle. It's hardly elegant, compared to the usual Capulet style. A cluster of girls about my age watch as I approach them. They're the first in line.

One of them holds a furled umbrella.

"Hey—" I say eagerly. "Can I borrow that?"

Before the girl can respond, I take the umbrella and smash the handle through the cracked glass. The pane splinters into tiny, fractured pieces.

I hand the umbrella back to the girl. She nods approvingly.

"I don't like lines either," she says.

ZU X ORI

A well-dressed Capulet guard hurries toward me, as I step through the broken glass. He looks seriously tough. He's about to speak up.

"Get Tai—" I say.

My tone surprises him.

"Who are—"

"You know who I am," I say.

Amazingly he doesn't challenge me. He turns and heads up the spiral staircase, while two other Capulets secure the broken glass door. They ignore me, while keeping the others outside.

But I'm the one who smashed the glass.

They don't dare, I realize. The Capulets need me. That's why they want me back.

I have power here.

I step forward into the showroom. The green, smart-looking vials of Nepenthe are laid out everywhere. On every table are tiny vials of Nepenthe. I bend over, peering into the deep green liquid.

Remembering oblivion.

"Want to try it again?" I hear.

FORGIVENESS

Tai is descending the stairs, arrogant as usual. But something's off. He seems to limp slightly. And there's a bruise on his eye, which warms my heart.

It's an unexpected gift.

A reminder of Ori.

Even battered, Tai has a powerful presence. For a moment, I question my decision to come. What difference can I possibly make?

I tense up, automatically.

"No thanks," I answer. "It worked perfectly." Tai draws closer to me, curiously. "It seems like you remember," he observes.

"You need to stop Nepenthe," I tell him.

"Grow up, Zu," Tai gestures at the line outside. "This is what people are waiting for." Beyond the glass walls, the dense clouds are growing darker. It's exactly what I don't want to see.

"I tried to warn you," Tai observes the storm. He steps away, turning up the stairs.

I feel sick inside.

I chase after him, into the perfume lab.

ZU X ORI

"You can still stop Nepenthe," I say, clinging to the reason I came here. My position feels hopeless. Tai doesn't have to do anything I say.

And my vision is coming true.

"You're too late, Zu," Tai says, wearily. "In an hour, Nepenthe will be on sale—in every Capulet store in the world."

"But it stops you from loving," I argue fiercely.

"That's the point!" Tai bellows.

I'm astounded by his outburst. I didn't think he'd be so obvious. He looks tired and overwhelmed with pain. I'm surprised by the compassion I feel.

"Tai," I say gently. "Look at me."

Tai holds his eyes to the floor.

"There's something you need to feel," I say.

Slowly, angrily, Tai raises his eyes to mine. The hard contours of the room begin to change. The cold tones of the perfume lab are disintegrating.

"Stop this," Tai commands me.

"It's not me," I say. "It's you. You're beginning to feel. You're retrieving your past."

"But I don't *want* to."

FORGIVENESS

The firm, square lines of the perfume lab are turning transparent. Our surroundings are changing. The bright Italian sun emerges through the dark New York clouds. What remains is Tai and me.

Or rather, Tybalt and myself.

Tybalt appears solidly and fully physical. His hair is a magnificent, sandy brown, his clothes the finest of the day. His face is proud and fierce.

I look down at my hands.

They are Capulet hands, golden tanned from the Italian sun. My shape—as Juliet Capulet—emerges from the transparent form of my New York body. I'm wearing my green lace dress. My hair is tied in beautiful braids. I step carefully forward.

Toward Tybalt.

He hides his gaze, avoiding me. We stand in the courtyard of the Capulet mansion.

"Tybalt—" I approach him tenderly, "I never meant to hurt you. I know I did." The Capulet lab has faded into the distant background, the glass skylight reduced to a translucent shadow.

I'm moved, seeing Tybalt in the flesh.

I feel my forgotten love for him. A sister's love. "I cared for you, when you were a baby," Tybalt says, clenching his fist. "And then you left us."

"I know. I'm sorry," I say genuinely. "It doesn't mean I didn't love you." Tybalt winces at my words.

Now I understand. This is personal.

This isn't really about Nepenthe. That's not why I'm here. This is about Tybalt and me, about the pain and misunderstandings of our past. Now there's a chance to change this.

To save Tybalt from his hate.

That's the reason I'm here.

All I can do is tell the truth. "Yes, I left you," I say. "I left too soon. But it was out of love."

"Love," Tybalt snorts.

But I feel he wants to understand. To open to me.

"Yes, I was born a Capulet," I continue moving toward Tybalt. "But I chose another way. I chose another life. But I *chose* it—it was *my* choice." I feel every word I am saying, observing how Tybalt responds. "Now it's your choice—to forgive me, or not.

"*Forgive?*" says Tybalt, like it's a foreign word.

FORGIVENESS

"Yes, forgive," I say with all my heart. "Forgive me for what I've done. That's all you have to do. Please, please forgive me." I place my hand on his arm. Tybalt is trying to resist letting me in.

But he wants to.

Because I am Juliet, his sister.

I am standing before him. I can smell the Verona earth and terra-cotta of the Capulet courtyard. I can see every wisp of Tybalt's hair, in crystal clarity. There is so much beauty in him, beneath all of his hardened hate. Tybalt looks at me lovingly.

There is a gentleness in his gaze.

I hold out my hand.

He reaches out, grasping it. His grip is tight, but underneath I feel him melting.

I place my arm around his shoulder, as the sunlight shines on his cheek. The balconies of the Capulet mansion look down on us and the green gardens. Tybalt lowers his gaze slowly, his tension unwinding. "How," he asks me, "do you forgive?"

I'm not sure how to answer.

ZU X ORI

I look down at the terra cotta. "Maybe it's about letting go," I say, "even when you've been wronged."

But I'm not satisfied with my answer.

A starling flies over our heads.

I look up, watching it, and say the first thing that comes to mind. "I lied to Orion—" I explain, as an example. "But he forgave me."

Tybalt freezes in my arms.

Oh—why did I mention Ori?

All his gentleness is gone. I feel his hard exterior reforming. How stupid could I be? Tybalt stands abruptly, backing away from me.

I was only trying to share with him.

His eyes blaze a sad hate.

"No," says Tybalt. "I don't forgive you."

He is stepping backward, retreating into the shadow of the Capulet mansion. Already the Verona sun is disappearing behind the clouds. The stone mansion is crumbling, stone by stone. In its place, the glass Capulet lab returns like a prison. Above the skylight is the swirling, black storm.

I'm still holding out my hand, stunned.

FORGIVENESS

Tybalt retreats from me, returning to the grey shadow of Tai, in the Capulet lab. He stares hatefully into Tai's face, then steps inside him.

My brother is gone.

Now Tai is glaring at me. The glass Capulet lab is as sterile as ever. I'm no longer covered in beautiful lace, but back in my hoodie.

The retrieval is over.

Tai stares at me with demented hate.

For the first time, I feel in danger.

The black storm has arrived. Above the skylight, the clouds are dark with rain. I can't tell if the darkness is the storm or the time of day.

How long have we been in retrieval?

Have I missed The Lights?

"I'm sorry, Zu," Tai's voice is hollow. "This time, I can't let you leave." The storm clouds are swirling violently above the skylight.

I back out of the lab.

Descending the stairs, I see a store filled with busy shoppers. Beyond the glass walls is the storm.

I walk calmly toward the exit.

ZU X ORI

Two Capulet guards come for me. I quicken my step, but one of them grabs my arm.

I can't break free.

The glass doorway is just steps ahead.

From my periphery, I see some shoppers around me, beginning to run. Suddenly the glass wall of the Capulet store shatters.

Glass shards fly overhead.

Everyone around me dives to the floor.

I hear the crunching, cracking sound of a hundred things breaking. The Nepenthe tables are somersaulting through the air, sideswiped by a white car drifting across the showroom floor.

I crouch down, shielding my face. The white car slides to a stop, as the passenger door opens.

"Come on, honey," I see Lauren's face.

The Capulet guards are distracted just enough. I fling myself into her car.



EPISODE 12 **FOR ALL HUMANITY**

LUCREZIA

My first memory is fuzzy, warm.

I can't even see the people around me, but I can feel them. I can feel their love. They appear as soft colored shapes around me, loving me.

I close my eyes.

In a state of half sleep, I can hear their gauzy voices, reverberating around me.

I let go into the sound.

ZU X ORI

I feel safe.



My next memory.

I'm with my mother. We're outdoors in a grassy place. I am old enough to stand. There's a breeze in the trees and in the grass.

My mother is wearing black.

But I can't see her face.

I reach for her hand.

There are others nearby. They act solemn and also dress in black. My mother stands in front of the grave. Her head is bowed, I can't see her face.

"Say goodbye, Lucrezia."

I say goodbye.

I hold her hand.

We turn away.



FOR ALL HUMANITY

I watch a video with my mother. I am seven or eight years old. On the screen is my father, arms out, encouraging me, while I crawl forward.

I have no memory of this.

I was too young.

I watch closely, studying my father's features and his movements. I want to learn more, about who he was. I wish the video was better quality. I want to see my father's face more clearly.

But I can see him, smiling.

As I crawl toward him.

I glance sideways at my mother, hoping she'll say something. But she's absorbed in the screen.

She doesn't notice me watching.

I go into my bedroom.

On my desk is a small picture of my father. I sit forward in my chair. I pull the picture close.



I became a good student. I felt a certain pleasure at arriving at definite answers. Naturally, my science classes became my favorite.

ZU X ORI

Chemistry in particular.

At the university, I make it my focus.

In addition to balancing equations, I enjoy being in the lab, in my white coat and goggles. I keep mainly to myself, but I feel a strange new sensation.

Belonging, I guess.

I make some friends.

We hang out together, in the evening city after classes, going from one place to another. I am learning to feel comfortable with others. We sit at a café. A car pulls up along the curb.

It's the father of one of my friends. I watch as he steps out, as she hugs her father warmly. It's a warmth I've never experienced.

We are offered a ride.

I decline, politely.

The others go on without me. I walk onward, up the evening street alone. I return to the fuzzy warm memory, when I was a baby.

That's all I have.



FOR ALL HUMANITY

Later I see a posting on my phone. It's something liked by my chemistry department.

Are you interested in memory?

Do you wish you remembered more?

Would you like to help others remember?

APPLY HERE

I click, filling out a form.

A month passes.

I receive a message from the head of the chemistry department. He reveals that the application is for an unnamed perfume company.

And I am accepted!

I attend an accelerated program at a respected perfume school, during the next summers. I don't consider myself especially gifted with scent, but I am a hard worker. And I want to remember. Only when I graduate do I learn the perfume company is the famous House of Capulet.

I am invited to Verona.

ZU X ORI

My task is to make memories.

I accept.



I am not told much, at first.

Only that I am to work on a very important and historical fragrance. One of the earliest Capulet perfumes, which has always had imperfections. But which may help people remember.

I support this.

I am given a diluted version of the perfume.

It comes in a red bottle.

Working late in the lab, I frequently sense something unusual. About the silent Verona night. Like a friendly, familiar touch. I enjoy these nights, maybe because I am alone in the lab. I stare into the deep red liquid, on the table before me.

I begin my work.

As usual, I experience the awakening of memory from the scent of the perfume. But instead of a single memory, the red fragrance seems to evoke many. From my early life

FOR ALL HUMANITY

and from my childhood. I become curious. How far back will it take me?

I test variations, noting the differences. Secretly, I am hoping for another memory.

Of my father.

But it never comes.

I'm always led back to the one.

To the warm, fuzzy memory.

Which I know so well.

I have been in the lab all night, growing tired. I've been entrusted with a stronger version of the red perfume. I reach for another oil. My coat sleeve sweeps the bottle. The red liquid spills out onto the table.

At first, I'm shocked.

I smell the pure, earthy fragrance.

Immediately I'm brought back to that first, blurry memory. That warm, fuzzy memory. My favorite memory.

My only memory.

Of my father.

But it doesn't stop here.

I'm remembering more.

ZU X ORI

There is more, before this memory. There are other memories, behind this memory. I feel my skin tingling, awake.

This isn't my first memory of my father.

There are others. Many others.

Before this.

Now I remember.

I am walking to meet him. I don't know where I am. I don't know when. Only before.

I am going to him, with others beside me. We travel down the long pathway.

We enter into the sanctuary.

He stands alone, his back to me.

He is not my father, not yet.

But he will be.

The others leave us alone. It's only the two of us, in the high stone room. This isn't the first time we've met. We have stood here together, many times.

I am watching the back of his robe.

Filled with adoration.

This is a special moment.

FOR ALL HUMANITY

The moment I've been waiting for.

Then.

And now.

My whole life.

He is turning around, to face me.

As the memory blacks out.



I can see no more.

Night after night I return there. To the sanctuary, to the man with his back to me. But I go no further. The door to this memory is locked.

I don't have the key.

Honestly, I barely knew what this was. What was I seeing? But I couldn't look at anything the same again. I finally confide in Tai.

"What am I remembering?"

"It's your past life, Lu," Tai answers, distractedly. "That's the whole point of the red perfume."

It's different, having it spelled out.

"How do I see more?"

ZU X ORI

But Tai just laughs at me, shaking his head. "Be careful what you wish for."

So I return alone, in my memory. Again and again. But the memory always ends.

Before I see his face.

But I have to know.

Could I go on, without knowing?

Everything depends on this.

But no matter what I try, I can never go further. I can never go past this moment.

Of standing behind this person.

Who would be my father.

And waiting for him.

To face me.



ZU

We reverse out the Capulet store.

A slab of glass shatters over the windshield. One of the Capulet guards paws on the window. His hands thump harmlessly on the glass.

FOR ALL HUMANITY

I see Tai, at the top of the stairs.

For a moment, our eyes meet. I've never seen such pain.

Then he's left behind.

We're accelerating up the New York streets. Behind us is the Capulet store.

Above us, the black storm.

"Lauren—" I say.

"I told you—" she turns, "I'd look out for you."

The brown buildings are speeding by. I'm breathing on pure adrenaline. I can see the black storm clouds swirling. Newspapers and plastic bags are blowing over the street and sidewalks.

It's exactly like my vision.

"What time is it?" I ask suddenly.

"You missed your slot," says Lauren. "But we might still make it."

I go into free fall.

Has it really been that long?

Everything is happening at full speed. My thoughts, the storm and the streets are racing. The past sixty seconds feels like ten.

ZU X ORI

“Uh oh—”

Lauren snaps her head back. Two small black cars are closing in fast. Their small size is allowing them to weave through the crowded lanes.

From the look of them, they are Italian.

Of course.



TAI

I watch the shattered Capulet store.

It hardly seems to matter anymore. I return inside to the perfume lab. I feel a gripping pain in my heart, like a blistering flame.

It's the pain I always feel.

But I can't ignore it anymore.

I ask myself: *Where did this pain come from? Why do I feel this?*

I need to know.

It was already there, in Verona.

Lucrezia bursts through the doors. “Where have you been?” she shouts, alarmed. “Have you seen—”

FOR ALL HUMANITY

"Of course," I turn away.

My right hand is locked in a ball.

"Did you see Zu?"

"She's gone."

"Gone?"

I continue into the lab. Lucrezia follows after me, anxiously. "But you said—" she stammers, "Zu was going to help us!"

"I was wrong."

"But the red perfume," she says. "Our memory work."

I'm no longer interested. I've never cared about the memory perfume, anyway. "You can't bring back your father, Lu. It's too late."

"Maybe for you," she replies. She turns toward the frosted doors of the lab.

"Where are you going?"

"The theater," she says brusquely.

Lucrezia rushes out of the perfume lab. The doors close behind her. I continue, toward the ceramic table in the center of the lab.

Ahead of me, RITA is waiting.



ZU

A black motorcycle speeds up behind the two Capulet cars, joining them. Lauren accelerates, in response. We're racing up between the tall brown buildings. The rolling storm clouds are pitch black, which chills me more than the pursuing Capulets. It's mid afternoon in New York, but it looks like night.

The black cars are right behind us.

One of them pulls alongside.

I can see the Capulet driver, in his finely pressed shirt. Seeing him, I realize: *the Capulets aren't evil*. They're just stuck in the past.

Trying to control others.

They haven't evolved past that stage. The Capulet driver veers his car directly into us, grinding the metal of our cars together.

Trying to force us off the road.

So I don't get to The Lights.

So I don't make my appointment.

So I don't escape them.

FOR ALL HUMANITY

His car window rolls down. The driver strikes my window with a heavy baton, once and twice. But it doesn't break the glass.

Lauren looks at me, impressed.

The next blow shatters glass all over me. The Capulet driver leaps into my window, his car veering astray without him, careening into parked cars.

He's reaching for the steering wheel.

I'm grappling with Capulet driver, as he dangles from the window.

His legs narrowly miss the passing cars. We swerve from one lane to another. Behind us, the second black car slams into us, trying to unbalance us.

Ahead the yellow light turns red.

Lauren accelerates through it. Cars from both directions scream by us. I grab the Capulet driver by the collar, with both my hands. Our eyes lock deeply, inches apart. Something is happening.

His face begins to change.

I'm seeing one face after another, layered over his physical features. A teenage boy, then a beautiful young girl, then an older woman gaze back at me.

ZU X ORI

It's a multi-life time crossing.

Somehow I've triggered it.

A half dozen of the Capulet driver's past lives appear before me. Each one is searching me.

Eye to eye.

I've never experienced anything like this. I didn't even know it was possible. I am seeing thousands of years of their past. What I'm seeing is the *real* Capulet driver. Who doesn't want to hurt me. Who's only joined the Capulets in this life, anyway.

Who doesn't care about this chase.

We are connecting, human to human. We speed onward for a block, like this.

Eye to eye.

The Capulet driver has stopped fighting. He's too immersed in what he's seeing about his past. He holds my gaze, intently.

Then he simply lets go.

His body drops away from Lauren's car. I look back, watching him rolling over the pavement.

FOR ALL HUMANITY

Beside me, Lauren meets my gaze. She's seen what just happened. The other Capulet car and motorcycle are swerving behind us, darting through traffic.

All three vehicles race onward.

Under the darkening storm.



ORI

I'm backstage with Hermes.

I haven't heard from Zu all day. The final performances are concluding. A girl in VR goggles is throwing daggers at a boy strapped to a spinning wheel.

I turn away from the stage.

"Where is she?" I glare at Hermes.

Hermes evades my gaze. "What happens if we miss the appointment?" I ask.

Hermes steps away.

"We don't want to find out," he says.

I stare at Hermes, anxiously.

ZU X ORI

The VR girl is coming offstage to applause, carrying her batch of daggers. She removes her headset, her hair spilling free as she passes me.

"Can I borrow that?" I point to a dagger. In our rush, we've completely forgotten our props.

"Sure."

She hands me the dagger.

"Be careful, it's sharp."

I nod, distantly.

Aisha hurries up to me.

"Ori, I looked everywhere," she says. "This is the best I could find." She pulls out a green glass vial.

It's Nepenthe.

"Where did you get that?" I recoil.

"Umm, I bought it?" Aisha answers, guiltily. "I haven't tried it yet. Maybe it'll work?"

I hate the absolute sight of it.

But it's also perfect. For our performance.

"Thanks, Aisha," I take the vial.

Hermes is watching me.



HERMES

I come up on the rooftop.

It's the night before The Lights. In the moonlight, Ori and Zu are sitting on the ledge, casually looking out over the city. "Well, my holograms are done," I say.

They look pleased.

I jump on the ledge beside them.

But I sense something.

"We're discussing the weather," Zu tells me. The skies are clear above the city lights. "For tomorrow."

I look toward Zu.

"When I first met Tai," Zu explains, "he gave me Orpheus, a perfume that shows the future. I saw a brick mansion and a black storm, and Ori lying dead in a circle. That brick mansion was *your home*, Hermes. It was the future."

Ori looks out at the city.

"That's only one of three," Ori points out. "Only one of the three has happened!"

ZU X ORI

"Isn't that enough?" asks Zu. "And if there's a storm tomorrow? That will be two of three."

I gaze at Zu and Ori's faces.

"What are you suggesting?" Orion asks. "We skip The Lights?"

"I don't know!"

Ori stands up on the ledge.

"You can't protect me," he says. "If that's our future, that's our future. That's our destiny."

Zu stands up also.

"I can do The Lights—without you."

Orion walks away, shaking his head. "You said it yourself. It's what we do together."

Zu sighs, audibly.

"Hermes?" she looks at me.

"You met for a reason," I say simply. "Love can change the world. When you give it everything—even when you don't know why or what happens next." I look at them. "Then love becomes a gift."

The three of us look out across the city. The moon and stars shine down upon the buildings.



ZU

The second Capulet car slams us from behind. Alongside us, the third Capulet races up on the black motorcycle. I see her blazing red hair, rippling in the wind.

She leaps out onto the glass roof of Lauren's car, shattering it instantly and landing on top of me.

The red-haired Capulet seizes me.

But immediately the same thing happens. Our eyes meet, I am seeing into her past. A series of ghostly faces appears, one after another. It's impossible for her to keep fighting me. Something is changing. She looks as if she's always known me.

As if we've been friends.

Now there's a blue light above us.

It's the blue light from my dream of Verona. And the Capulet lab.

But what's it doing here?



TAI

"Rough day, Tai?" says RITA.

"I need to see something," I say.

RITA wavers in red. "You mean, remember something?" she asks me. I stand before the ceramic altar-like table, gripping the surface.

"Yes," I say.

"Tai," says RITA, "I never agreed with your uncle giving you the memory trial. You weren't ready."

"What was left out?" I demand.

"All your lives before Verona."

"Why?"

"They weren't necessary."

"I need to see them."

I place my left palm on the table. From below the surface, a beam of light scans my hand. A red vial begins rising from the interior of the table.

"I warn you," says RITA, "this is extremely risky."

The red vial comes to a stop. It stands atop a bright red square on the tabletop. On the side of the vial is a digital reading.

FOR ALL HUMANITY

It reads: 10%

I move my finger upward along the vial, sliding the reading to 100%. "Tai, this potency will allow you to remember all your past lives," RITA announces.

"I know."

"I can't allow it," RITA is silent a moment. "You won't be able to handle the integration. The odds of your survival are 860 to 1."

"Override," I say.

I've lived too long with this pain.

RITA remains silent. After two long seconds, the red square beneath the vial turns white.

RITA says: "Good luck, Tai."

I lift the red vial, removing the polished top. I pour a single red drop on the ceramic altar.

The drop splashes up on impact.

The invisible molecules exploding into the air.

In a half second, my view of reality is shattered. It's like an incredible medicine, working its way through my body. I collapse forward onto the altar, my mouth locked in a silent gasp. I feel I'm being torn apart. I've never experienced anything like this. It's the pain, pleasure and exhilaration,

ZU X ORI

fear and joy, hope and humiliation of every emotion I've ever had, multiplied a thousand times. A tidal wave of emotions is crashing down on me.

I know I won't survive this.

My eyes are tightly shut. But my inner eye is flooded with images, one after another: a beautiful village, clouds and clouds, celebrations, faces and faces and laughter, a raging river, a baby's cry, children, the sun and moon in the sky, a battlefield and armies clashing, a strand of hair upon a cheek, a canoe in the moonlight, letters and handwriting. Each image is also an emotion, a sense of myself. It is a full and complete picture of all my past. I am bombarded with emotions, images, each lasting split seconds, merging and overlapping into each other.

It's a matter of seconds in the real world.

But millennia inside of me.

I collapse to the base of the altar, my arms and legs sprawled awkwardly. Above the skylight, the black storm rains down heavily.

I appear unconscious.

Inside me, the centuries unravel. Like a film rewinding faster and faster, from two to five to five hundred images a

FOR ALL HUMANITY

second. I can't keep up with my memories. I feel myself splitting into hundreds of parts.

This will be the end of me.

I feel myself approaching my limit.

On the one side is everything I know of myself. On the other, infinity and annihilation. I feel myself riding the edge of my limits, learning to navigate thousands of years of memories. The images go on and on.

Then slowly stop.

On one single scene.

It's a lush green countryside. The misty morning and fields are as vibrant as they could only be in the distant past, a thousand years ago.

Before I was Tybalt, before Verona.

There's no longer any place on earth like this. No countryside so untouched and dense. I'm enlivened by the green air upon my skin.

A small farm rests on the edge of the forest.

I live there. I'm a simple man, compared to my present life. I live in a small, wooden house. It's dark inside, with few windows, but at the right time of the day, near dusk, the sunlight aligns and shines through the door. I tend the small

ZU X ORI

farm by myself. I harvest two fields and raise a few pigs. It isn't much, but I look after it carefully, keeping busy from morning to night. I'm a hardy man, who understands the land.

My life revolves around my labor.

The images linger on the farm and the woods. Then a young woman's face appears, radiant as the sun. A face of honest, simple beauty.

This woman has entered my life.

Before this moment, I lived only for my work. I had never expected to meet anyone. But now I have met this beautiful woman. We are talking outdoors, the midday sun above us—we are smiling. I am smitten. I love this woman, and she loves me. We are dancing together at the village festival. Everyone is dancing. I feel I am the luckiest man in the world. For the first time in my life, I feel true happiness. The young woman is simple and straightforward, the daughter of someone in the village. She loves me for who I am, for my work ethic and for my honesty.

I never tell a lie. It is against my principles.

We are married outdoors, in a green field. She is wearing white. Her family is there. I am humbled and reserved as always, but inside I am overjoyed. I take her

FOR ALL HUMANITY

hand before the priest. My wife places a silver chain in my right hand, attached to a rose petal pendant. The priest is pleased. Not all couples are so happy.

My wife and I kiss.

Together we live on the small farm. Her presence brings joy to the wooden house. The air feels lighter and every room of the house is happy. I have found a new life. My wife assists me with the farm, even with the pigs. I no longer work alone. My solitary life is over. I never expected this, never even hoped for this.

But this is my life now.

Two, three seasons pass.

My wife is giving birth. It's midnight in the bedroom of the small house. The early winter snow covers the ground. The midwife is there, and my wife is having our baby by candlelight. I sit anxiously in the bedroom. I feel everything in my life depends on what is happening now. Finally in the early hours, my wife gives birth. Our daughter is born. I hold her, my eyes wet.

Now it's the New Year. It's cold and the snow is falling heavily. My wife lies ill in bed, while I labor outside. I am cutting wood for our fire. My wife looks pale beneath the covers. She is propped against the pillows, holding our

ZU X ORI

baby. I feed her soup from a wooden spoon, sitting beside the bed. My wife sips the soup weakly.

I watch them, worried.

Outside, the snow keeps falling.

The scene shifts to the winter woods. A view of treetops and white sky are visible through bare branches. Below, a black-clothed priest is saying something. He makes a gesture with his hands. My wife and baby are being lowered into the ground. Two men shovel dirt into the ditch. I stand alone beside the hole. The priest is speaking, but I don't hear him. The snow is falling on the ground. The priest is walking away. I am left alone in the forest.

The last thing I see is the wooden house.

It's barren and empty. For miles, there is nothing but winter. I live alone with my memories. Sometimes the pain in my heart is so much I collapse onto the earthen floor, crying until I fall asleep.

I feel this pain in my heart.

I see images of my wife while she was alive: smiling, radiant as the day, laughing and kissing me. Images of the empty house.

I see myself alone, on a country road at dusk. I carry a small pack, walking away from the house. In my right hand, I

FOR ALL HUMANITY

hold the silver chain with the rose pendant, my wife's gift from our wedding day. It dangles between my fingers. I am clenching the links of the chain as tightly as I can, rubbing them between the fingers of my fist.

Again and again, I clench the rose pendant within my closed fist. This clenching is all I can feel.

I take a vow:

I will never love anyone again.

I hear myself speaking: *I promise, for ever and ever, I will never love again. Oh God, if only you take this pain from me, I will never love again.*

I will never love again. I promise.

I promise.

Something snaps across time. I feel my eyelids flutter. In my heart is the pain from the winter farm, but my eyes see the floor of the Capulet lab. I feel both experiences at once. My first thought: *I'm alive.*

My second: *I remember.*

I remain motionless, staring sideways across the cold white floor. I feel the memories of my past as a symphony inside of me. Every memory is a note, with its own time and

ZU X ORI

place in the larger whole. I no longer feel pain. Only understanding, for who I am.

I know what I have to do:

I have to save Orion.

No one else can save him. His fate has already been decided, but maybe I can change it. Zu made her choice. She loves Orion and so be it. It was only my hardened heart that tried to prevent this. How long I've lived with this hardened heart!

My entire life and my Verona life too. The battles with Orion and the Montagues—all because of this pain in my heart. It was too much to feel, so I closed myself off. I became a stranger to love.

I even forgot why.

My beautiful wife, who died.

Now I remember. In my pain, I had forgotten even you. But now I remember. Now I remember you.

I experience all this instantly.

Then in the next instant:

Forgetting is wrong. Nepenthe is wrong.

FOR ALL HUMANITY

I made forgetting my life's work. I built a shrine to forgetting, because I felt too much pain to remember. I wanted the world to forget.

Like I did.

But it's wrong, it's wrong.

I start to cry.

I lie sideways, a cold tear falling from my eye onto the floor. Above, the rain cascades on the skylight.

I begin to move. I flounder at first, as if learning to use my limbs again. But then my muscles remember. I make it onto my knees, then stand gingerly beside the white ceramic table. How much time has passed? Have I been here for hours? An entire day? I've lived through lifetimes.

But how long has passed in the real world?

I look down at the ceramic block. In the center is a digital console, displaying minutes and seconds. I stare, as it passes 9:59 and hits 10:00.

Ten minutes!

Lifetimes in ten minutes.

"Welcome back," I hear a voice, then remember who is speaking. "I'm glad you made it," RITA says.

I don't have time to chat.

ZU X ORI

"Access the Nepenthe formula."

"Why?"

"I need to make a change."

"But why?" RITA repeats.

"Nepenthe is flawed," I explain. I am quickly regaining my clarity.

"You are incorrect, Tai," RITA says. "Nepenthe is perfect."

"Access the base formula, RITA."

"I cannot."

"Why?" I am stunned.

I feel a pang of fear. I calm myself, knowing RITA will detect my voice tones.

"You yourself programmed me, Tai, to block access to the base formula," says RITA, pausing, "unless there was good cause. So I need to understand why."

"I don't have time—"

"Then be quick," says RITA.

I grip the table, grinding my teeth.

"Nepenthe has a flaw—"

"That's not true, Tai," RITA interrupts me. "Nepenthe is perfect. We created it together."

FOR ALL HUMANITY

"Yes. It's perfect in what it does," I explain, hastily. "But it's *what it does* that's imperfect. Humans are meant to remember. Not forget."

"You told me humans want to forget."

"I was wrong. We want to forget—only because we are afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"Afraid of feeling."

RITA does not respond.

"We aren't machines, like you," I argue. "We feel incredible, overwhelming, heartbreaking feelings."

"Is that a flaw?" RITA asks.

"No—" I say. "It's—a gift. But the flaw is that when the feelings are too overwhelming—too overpowering—we shut down. That's our flaw. We close down to who we truly are. We live in small, safe sectors."

RITA is thinking.

"Humans are more than they appear," says RITA.

"Yes! Yes!" I exclaim.

I stand there anxiously, waiting. RITA is silent again. I wonder what is going on inside her mind. I can almost feel her learning.

ZU X ORI

"The base formula is unlocked," RITA says.

I feel an elation I've never experienced. Yes—yes, yes!
Now nothing stands in my way.

"Display it," I command.

A holographic representation of Nepenthe's base formula appears above the ceramic altar. It rotates slowly, while I observe it. It's so beautiful, I think. The work of so many years and so much effort, all for the purpose of forgetting who we are.

What a titanic waste.

I am looking, looking, looking. My eyes scan dozens of chemical compounds in microseconds, searching for the crucial link.

Where? What do I change?

"Can we just delete it?" asks RITA.

"No, too obvious," I reply. I look up and down at the holographic formula. "How much has Nepenthe already been used?" I ask.

"Nepenthe has been used 13,236,928 times," RITA replies. "Unfortunately, our update will not affect these users."

I cringe.

FOR ALL HUMANITY

I feel the weight of the all those destinies. All those lives sent astray.

“Life is imperfect,” RITA says.

Frantically I search the dozens of ingredients. Where is the crucial compound? I’m reminded of Nepenthe’s amazing simplicity. It’s not a complex mash of hundreds of chemical compounds. Rather the opposite. Its perfection is its simplicity. Then I see it. There.

Essence of apple.

Of course.

It’s barely noticeable in the perfume at all. But it influences all the other relationships. I joined essence of apple together with starflower in a recipe of forgetting. “Change apple to—” I consider for a pensive moment, then smile broadly.

“Change apple to rose.”

It’s perfect. Even in hacking my own perfume, I can appreciate the artistry of my work. “An elegant choice, Tai,” says RITA.

“However,” says RITA, “I’m afraid you aren’t authorized to make changes to base formula.”

What!

ZU X ORI

"But—you said," I stammer.

"No one person has authorization."

I feel a staggering weight of despair. It's like being buried under an avalanche, one step from victory. My monster will win after all.

"But I do," says RITA. "Base formula is updated. All logs have been erased." The crucial molecular link glows bright blue, then slowly fades.

It's done.

I stand alone at the table, my legs trembling. I place my palms on the ceramic altar, bow my head deeply and remember all the people I have ever cared for, ever loved. Multitudes of people over lifetimes, friends, chance encounters, Zu of course—and above all, my wife in the winter house, so long ago.

I love you still.

There is one thing left to do.

I have to change Ori's future. But how? I don't even know if it's possible. But I have to try. I gaze into RITA's ruby image.

I feel like a child again.

"Thank you, RITA."

FOR ALL HUMANITY

I turn quickly from the altar. The black clouds and rain rage above the skylight. I exit the lab, hearing RITA behind me, one last time.

"Goodbye, Tai."



LAUREN

I'm staring at my phone.

I've only slept a couple hours. Zu hasn't answered any of my calls. And I won't bother Orion again.

But I've found her location.

Her location she shared with me.

I'm waiting in my white car, outside the Capulet store. As the clouds and rain move in. Zu's location hasn't changed for hours.

But now it's moving.

From where I've parked, I see Zu through the glass. Someone is grabbing her arm. I stare forward, frozen. I won't let her down again.

Whatever my past, I won't make that mistake.

I accelerate into the glass.



ZU

The Capulet car rams our bumper again. He's forcing us straight ahead, into the next intersection. With the Capulet car behind us, we can't slow down. Ahead in the intersection, a city bus is trapped in gridlock.

We're heading straight into it.

It's impossible to avoid. I see the stunned faces of the passengers in the windows.

Around us is the blue white light.

It seems to breathe, contracting like an in-breath, then expands again, so I can barely see. Then my vision is blotted out completely. The bus has disappeared. The red-haired Capulet is gone. All that remains is the blue white light, enveloping me.

It's a feeling of peace.

Everything is calm. In this light, I finally understand the real me. That's all that exists, the light and myself. I am everyone I have ever been. Now.

And forever.

I exhale.

FOR ALL HUMANITY

Smile.



ZU (past life)

We arrive on the bluff.

The long landscape stretches out before us, the desert sun in the distance.

Orion and I have been walking, for days.

I uncover my head from my shawl. We look different, but it is us. Verona has not even happened.

The sandy dwellings of the settlement lie below. We start down the rocky embankment.

There is a man in the temple.

Waiting for us.



We lie near the pool, in the oasis.

The shallow water is still and calm. Orion sits up, looking at me.

We understand each other.

Those eyes, I know.

ZU X ORI

This gaze will grow, to become something more. In
Verona, two thousand years from now.

Someone runs toward us.

A sudden clapping of wings.

We look up, above the dry palms. A rapture of birds is
crossing the sky.



DELPHINE

"Delphine—"

I imagine hearing my name.

The air is thick with acrid smoke, but from where I lie, I
can see the peaceful sky above.

My eyes close.

"Delphine—"

I raise my eyes, weakly.

Through the smoke sifting above the street, someone is
running toward me.

It's Tabithe.

She is crouching over me, her blue eyes loving me. She
is lifting me into her arms.

FOR ALL HUMANITY

I can see the peaceful sky above.



HERMES (youth)

I descend down the stairs.

I'm drawn here, I don't know why. I follow the stone stairway to the basement. I am at home alone. My parents have left for the evening.

At the base of the stairs is a stone wall.

My young hands reach out, exploring the cold and drafty wall. I push on the stones, in vain.

I push harder.

Until the wall gives way.

Gasping I fall through the hole. The stones lie around me, like rubble. I look up from my hands.

Ahead of me is a stone hallway.

I raise myself upward.

On the stone floor, concealed beneath the loose rubble, is a carving of a large tree.

Something about it feels so familiar.

I go forward.

ZU X ORI



ORI

Orion stares at me gravely.

"We missed our appointment, Hermes," he says.

The other performances have all ended. There is no more time. We stand off-stage, waiting.

Without Zu.

I stare at Orion.

"Not yet," I say.



ZU

The blue white light is dissolving. I can see Lauren again, her hand on the wheel. Behind us the city bus is still in the intersection. I don't know what's happened, but the last Capulet car is sideways on the street. The red-haired Capulet is beside it on the pavement. She's on her knees, watching as we pull away.

The streets ahead of us are clear.

FOR ALL HUMANITY

We're driving straight into the storm. Ahead of us, the dark clouds and rain swirl upon the blackened sky. Just as I've envisioned it.

I cannot lose Orion again.

Oh strength, be with me.



ORI

Ms. Hernandez is speaking to me.

I don't want to hear her.

"I'm sorry Zu couldn't make it," I hear her mouth moving. "I was looking forward to her performance. It sounded really special."

I don't respond.

"Ori?"

I don't look at her.

Ms. Hernandez observes me kindly, then turns and walks away. Onto the stage.

I remember Verona, my banishment.

The plan that went wrong.

ZU X ORI

*The messenger never arrived. They missed the
appointment. In Mantua, where I was staying*

So I went to the tomb

In another life.

We missed our appointment.

Now it's happening again.

So I went to the tomb

And found her there

Ms. Hernandez is walking away from me.

Onto the stage.

"Wait—" I say.

She stops slowly, turning to me.

I hear my own words.

"Let's go on."

Ms. Hernandez looks at me, but doesn't respond. She
continues onto the stage.

I stare down toward the floor.

FOR ALL HUMANITY

So I went to the tomb

To die with her there

"I'd like to thank everyone," Ms Hernandez addresses the audience. "Each and every one of you has made this evening possible." I stare down toward the floor. "But before we conclude," she says, "we have one more performance."

I look up.

Ms. Hernandez glances at me. "I actually don't know much about this," she tells the audience. "This is a performance by Zu, one of our new students—together with one of our older students—Orion, who many of you know." She glances down, at a card in her hand. "It's called *Once Upon A Time In Verona*."

Ms. Hernandez exits the stage, passing me.

The lights turn down. Hermes' holograms fill the stage. They are the ghostly outlines of the Capulet tomb, in Verona.



ZU X ORI

TAI

I sprint through the rain.

The storm is coming down in sheets. Lucrezia and all the cars were gone.

So I started to run.

But it's too far away. And I'm too late. Torrents of water drench my face. The city blocks are a rainy blur.

A dark car cuts off my path.

I watch, as the window comes down.

The driver leans outward. "Tai Fang," he says. "Santiaga wishes to offer you a ride."

I step back, shocked.

Then climb inside.

In the backseat Santiaga sits perfectly still, like a divine statue. Her white jacket and hair are flawless. She turns, slowly, making the barest of eye contact.

She says nothing. I sit beside her, looking ahead. Anxiously, through the wiper blades.

Santiaga speaks. "A long time ago," she says, "I lived in Paris. I had a headstrong student. She resisted me, even pointed a pistol at me. She reminds me of you. In fact, I

FOR ALL HUMANITY

believe you've met," she pauses. "But when she saw her past, everything changed."

I turn slightly, remaining silent.

"We've been on different sides," she says. "Montagues and Capulets, life after life, century after century. It won't always be this way."

I set my eyes ahead.

I feel the emotions inside me.

Of all my lives. They're bigger than me. I feel them expanding outward, breaking my boundaries. I struggle to hold myself together. As a single individual. To integrate my lives. I feel them pulling me apart.

Pulling me into pieces.

I can't keep myself together.

But I have to.



ORI

I walk onto the stage.

Hermes' holograms are exactly as Zu has drawn them. As I remember them. It's the image of the Verona tomb,

ZU X ORI

ghostly and grey. Ahead of me is the lifeless hologram of Zu, lying on the stage.

In my hand I hold the dagger.

In my other, Nepenthe.

So I went to the tomb

And found her there

The only light is on stage.

I can barely see the theater.

I approach Zu's hologram slowly. It wears the white dress from the tomb.

But it's only an empty hologram.

Zu isn't here.

This wasn't the plan.

This wasn't the performance we planned. We had something else in mind.

I've been here before.

The past and present are the same.

Something was supposed to happen.

FOR ALL HUMANITY

And now it's not.

So I went to the tomb

To die with her there

I've felt this horror before.

I'm in both places at once. I've been here before. But both are the same.

I step forward, silent.

Toward the lifeless hologram.

But Zu isn't there.

So I went to the tomb

To die with her there

I drop the dagger at my feet.

I slouch down beside the hologram. But I can't even take its hand.

We missed our appointment.

There's no going back.

ZU X ORI

The timeline has stopped.

I can't see ahead.

So I went to the tomb

To die with her there

I sit beside the empty hologram. The theater is silent,
the stage is quiet.

I remove the cap of Nepenthe.

I lift the vial, inhale.



ZU

I burst open the theater doors.

Lauren is right behind.

We come down the aisle.

The holograms are already on stage.

They've started!

Without me.

I come quickly toward the stage.

FOR ALL HUMANITY

The theater is deadly quiet. People are turning their heads, to look at me. I hardly notice.

Ori is lying on the stage.

His Verona hologram appears, beside him.

How could he start, without me?

That wasn't the plan.

This doesn't make any sense.

Why is everyone so quiet?

I'm dripping wet.

I ascend the side stairs to the stage. Ori is lying on the stage. This wasn't what we planned. *Why is everyone so quiet?* My wet shoes slip, I fall hard on the stairs. There's a gasp from the audience.

I climb up.

I continue, toward Orion.



LUCREZIA

I enter the theater, quietly.

ZU X ORI

I see Zu under the stage lights. The exact vision I saw with Orpheus. On the Capulet plane, three days ago. Before I saw myself in tears.

I take a seat, near the stage.

Beside me is a woman holding a vial of Nepenthe, a glossy, vacant look in her eyes. In my hand, I hold my phone. On the screen is the photo of my father.

I watch the stage.

Like everyone else.



ZU

I walk toward him.

Ori is lying on the stage.

I see our Verona holograms, beside him.

But something's wrong.

This isn't my performance.

This isn't—

What we planned.

I advance forward. I'm standing beside the outline of my Verona hologram. This isn't what we rehearsed. But I was

FOR ALL HUMANITY

late. Ori lies backward, his legs beneath him. His eyes are open but vacant, dreamy.

He doesn't see me.

A drop of water drips off my lip.

Between us is the dagger.

In his hand is Nepenthe.

What.

What is happening?

I lean over Ori.

His eyes look past me.

I shake his shoulders.

"Ori!" I shout.

What's happening? The holograms, the tomb, it's all what I had in mind. But this wasn't what we planned.

This wasn't the plan.

"Orriii—"

I shake him.

No.

Because I was late.

But why? Nepenthe?

ZU X ORI

I lean closer.

"Ori," I whisper.

I'm back in the tomb.

That's all I see now, all I feel.

*That's why they wanted to stop me. Why the Capulets
tried to stop me.*

So I'd miss our appointment.

Is that what Ori realized?

Is that why?

This?

Now it's automatic.

My eyes fall on the dagger. I'm back in the tomb, in
Verona. This wasn't our plan. This wasn't supposed to
happen. I reach out for the dagger.

I'm back in the tomb.

There's no theater.

No audience.

I push the blade toward my chest. It carves a line of
blood upon my skin. I know what happens next.

There's nothing I need to do.

It's all automatic.

FOR ALL HUMANITY



LUCREZIA

I sit forward in my seat.

What is happening?

The audience is completely rapt. Completely focused.
But this doesn't seem like a performance. This feels too
unsettling, too real.

I feel something, opening in my heart.

From a long time ago.

My eyes glisten.



ORI

I can see her.

The girl with the purple hair.

Above me, her hands on the dagger.

Like a dream.



ZU X ORI

ZU

I can feel the other side of the knife.

The other side of life.

The afterlife.

One act away.

That's how we got here.

The Capulet tomb is cold as stone. Orion lies on the lifeless ground. My eyes take in the tomb, one last time. But something about it is different now.

A blue white light.

In the air of the tomb.

It's such a faint, blue light.

Barely visible.

But here.

This same light.

From the dream. From the fountain. From the chase, where I tried so hard. To make it here. It's been here all along.

In this blue light is me

FOR ALL HUMANITY

This light and myself

Now and forever

I am me

But I came too late.

We missed our appointment. My hands are like steel.
They know exactly what to do. I came too late. I missed our
appointment.

A trickle of blood, down the blade.

In this blue light is me

This light and myself

Now and forever

I am me

I don't hesitate.

A shriek of life erupts from my mouth. My steel hands
slam the dagger down.

Two inches deep.

Into the stage floor.

ZU X ORI

The dagger trembles, upright.

On the floor beside me, my Verona hologram rolls onto its side. Into the arms of death.

Into the afterlife.



LUCREZIA

I watch spellbound.

No one knows what's happening. This doesn't feel like a performance. There are people around me, crying. The woman with Nepenthe beside me is crying. Her eyes are clear and no longer glossy.

It stopped Nepenthe, I realize. The performance stopped Nepenthe.

My gaze returns to the stage.

I should be crying, too.

But I can't cry.



ZU

I throw myself forward.

FOR ALL HUMANITY

I lean down, kiss Orion.

I am crying.

I can see him, behind his eyes. In the blue light of the tomb, I reach out to him. I can feel him here, behind his frozen shape.

I reach out to him.

To bring him back.

In this blue light and us

That's all that exists

Now and forever

We will be

I can feel him.

Behind his eyes.

Reaching out to me.

To bring him back.

My tears fall over his face.

I kiss his lips.

Until I feel his eyes.

ZU X ORI

Meeting mine.

Beside him, his Verona hologram remains lifeless, lying on the stage.



HERMES

I leave my place, off-stage.

I make my way, around the outside hallway. Toward the front entrance of the theater.

Approaching the entrance is Tai.

I block his path.

We stand there, several steps apart.

"I need to go in," says Tai.

"No way," I reply.

We both know who we are.

We've stood this way before. On that final day in Verona. With our swords drawn high. I remember it well, like yesterday.

"You don't understand—" Tai steps forward.

"Stop," I say.

"Mercutio—"

FOR ALL HUMANITY

"My name is Hermes."

Tai appears strained, soaking wet. "Verona," he says rapidly, "was a long time ago."

"Not that long," I say.

I have forgotten nothing.

From the last time we met. Standing face to face, just like now. But a different place, a different face.

This villain, his sword in my side.

"*Swallow your pride—*" Tai says to me. "This is more important than you. Or me."

I rest my eye on Tai.

I am remembering that day in Verona. Remembering my rage.

Remembering my pain.

From that day.

"Get out of my way," says Tai.

I stare into his eyes.



ZU

Ori's eyes are like the sky.

ZU X ORI

I feel his eyes on mine. Coming back to me. Coming back from Nepenthe. Our heads are pressed together. We sit there together, supporting each other.

I have my arm around him.

Together we stand.

Our backs to the audience.

We are walking away.

Toward the back of the stage.

Only the holograms.

Remain.



LUCREZIA

Everyone has left their seats.

There's a buzz around the theater. People are milling about, discussing what they have seen.

I remain where I sit, unmoving. The photo of my father stares up at me. I feel something trapped in my heart. I sit staring at my phone.

It's a lifetime of loss.

Lodged in my heart.

FOR ALL HUMANITY

I don't have thoughts.

Only loss.

And longing.

I rise, moving forward.

Toward the stage.

I pass through the evening guests. People are passing on my left and right, but no one notices me. I climb the stairs to the stage.

And no one notices me.

Ahead of me stands the dagger.

Still stuck in the stage.

I step toward it.

I pick it up.



TAI

I step toward Hermes.

Passing him, as in slow motion.

Eye to eye.

Hermes watches me, allowing me to pass.

ZU X ORI

I open the theater doors. The performance has ended
and people are moving all about. I'm looking urgently
around for Orion.

I push my way through the crowd.

Toward the stage.



ZU

Backstage it's strangely silent.

No one is speaking.

But they are gathering around us. Everyone has
something to say. I can see it, in their faces. Something
special has happened.

But no one can say what it is.

Kimmo comes up to me.

"Oh my goodness," she holds out her phone. "It's
blowing up." I see a video of us on stage. I am leaning over
Ori's body, my eyes wet.

I am kissing him.

It's already at 1.2M views.

People are in the comments, crying.

FOR ALL HUMANITY

Talking about it.

1.5M views.

I hold Ori's hand.

"Orion—"

Behind us, it's Lauren.

I see Ori smile.



LUCREZIA

I move backstage.

There are people everywhere. I can't feel anything. I am only thinking of my father. My eyes are directly ahead. I hold the dagger against my leg.

What I am doing?

I don't know.

Everything is upside down.

Inside my heart.

All I know.

Is I have to see my father again. And I need Zu's help. To see my father again.

ZU X ORI

No one notices me.

I move forward.

Unfeeling.

Toward Orion.



LAUREN

“Lauren—” he smiles at me.

I look at Orion and Zu.

There’s a throng around them. They stand together in the middle of the circle.

Ori’s eyes are starry.

His expression is open.

At peace.



LUCREZIA

I thrust the dagger deep.

It hardly feels like me.

FOR ALL HUMANITY

I feel the blade press into the flesh. I feel the body slump forward against me. I step backward, shaken, my power gone. The dagger falls from my hands, clattering onto the floor.

But something has happened.



I am back with my father.

It's the place I've been a dozen times. The memory I've had a dozen times. Standing behind him. Alone in the high stone room.

I've just thrust my fist at him. It's the same motion, the same emotion as the dagger.

That's what triggered the memory.

I am angry at my father, because he's telling me I have to go away. Because I'm being sent away. So I've struck at him with my fist.

Now he turns to meet me.

The point where my memory always blacks out.

But not this time.

Now I see his face.

Now I see his face.

ZU X ORI

He is smiling at me.

There is so much love in his face. So much love for me.
The love I have missed. My whole life.

And now I am crying.

"I am sorry," he says deeply.

I wait, breathless.

"I had to leave you," he says. "As a baby. I stayed with
you as long as I could."

"Why?" I ask in tears.

"It was the only way you would find me," he says. "I had
to give you the motivation to find me."

I look at him in wonder.

"And here you are," he smiles.

He holds my hand, the hand I've hit him with. His eyes
are clear, like the stars. "What I'm about to show you," he
says, "will change the future of the world. But afterward, you
must forget everything you have seen."

He looks through my eyes.

"For many, many lifetimes," he says.

"Anything," I trust him, completely.

FOR ALL HUMANITY

In the stone room, the blue light is descending. The blue light we both know so well. "You will go lifetimes," he warns me, "without me. You will feel alone and abandoned. You will feel your friends are far away. You will have to go places you don't want to go. You will have to do things you don't want to do. But you can never lose faith. And we will meet again."

He leans forward.

He is speaking to me.

But his words appear as shapes in my mind. I hear his words as shapes in my mind.

The shapes tell the story of the world.

The secret history of the world.

I watch clear-eyed.

"These secrets will be safe," says my father. "They will be hidden even from you, within your forgotten memory. Until one day," he smiles. "Until one day, you remember them again."



TAI

I feel the blade in my side.

ZU X ORI

I feel Lucrezia's hand, her warmth against me. I smell the sweet lilac fragrance of her. That I have come to know so well.

And never appreciated.

I slump to the floor.

At her feet.



ZU

Tai lies bleeding. He rushed toward Orion and threw himself against Lucrezia. She stands over him, in a trance. The red dagger drops from her hand.

She stares at her hands, unbelieving.

I drop beside Tai, my hand on his chest. He stares upward at me.

"Forgive me, Zu—"

I grab his hand in mine.

"For what?"

"My life," he stares upward. "And the one before."

"I was filled with pain," Tai tries to breathe. "And hate. When all I wanted was love."

FOR ALL HUMANITY

His face is pale.

"You were always loved," I say.

Tai closes his eyes. "Now I can see," he coughs, his body shaking.

Lucrezia is beside me.

She stares forward, otherworldly.

"Orion—" Tai calls out.

Ori is kneeling beside him, opposite me. Tai lifts his hand weakly. Ori takes it firmly.

"Forgive me," says Tai, "for what I've done."

"I forgive you," Orion says deeply. He holds Tai's hand within his grasp.

I look at Ori through tears.

Lucrezia is kneeling over him. She appears as if in two worlds at once. "Tai, Tai—" she is crying. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. Please don't go, I'm sorry—"

Tai lifts his eyes.

"This is what I wanted," his lips smile.

Lucrezia grasps Tai's hand, as tightly as she can. She looks at him, holding his gaze, as intently and lovingly as she can.

ZU X ORI

"I'll see you again," he says.

Tai lies lengthwise on the floor. I bend over him, my hand touching his heart. Lucrezia is draped across Tai's chest. Ori and I each hold one of his hands. Standing around us are Hermes and Lauren, who wipes her eyes. Kimmo and Aisha and all the others surround us, motionless. Their eyes where Tai is lying.

The room is absolutely still.

The floor is white except for Tai's blood. Above, it rains down on the skylight.

Tai lies dead inside our circle.



PROLOGUE

ORI

There's a knock at my door.

I walk across the studio, open it.

Zu gives me a look.

"Ready?" she says.

I grab my bag, we head down the stairs together. Outside on Gansevoort we look across to the High Line, watching the traffic move up and down the street.

Zu smiles, as I tap my phone.

I enter a location.

The ride choices appear. I glance at them, and without hesitating, I choose Share.

Within a minute our Uber arrives. Zu and I recline in the backseat, closely together. She's wearing a white printed t-shirt and black jeans, and I've borrowed one of Hermes' jersey pullovers. We're watching New York City outside the windows.

I tap a notification on my screen, as Zu leans into me.

A news video begins playing: "In fashion news, Nepenthe, the latest fragrance from the House of Capulet, has become the biggest hit in the company's storied history. But the so-called "feel-good fragrance" isn't quite what people expected. Billed as the end of suffering, customers say Nepenthe is more like a leisurely walk in the park."

"But it's the bottom line that matters. The House of Capulet appears stronger than ever."

"In a related story, memorials are being held for Tai Fang, creative director of the House of Capulet. As you know, Tai Fang was killed backstage at the Trinity Lights benefit this weekend. Details are still murky, but his creative heir Lucrezia de Rosa has been taken into custody. The

question on everyone's mind now: Who will lead the company?"

I move to switch it off, but Zu grabs my hand.

"On another note," the announcer continues, "a performance at the same Trinity Lights event has gone viral. A re-make of *Romeo and Juliet* by two Trinity Rose high-schoolers has hit 100 million views across social media platforms." The video cuts to a short snippet of Zu, bent over my body on the stage. "Viewers say the students captured the timeless magic of the famous lovers in a deeply moving way."

We watch a reporter talking.

"The performance has even sparked an urban myth," she looks into the camera, "that Nepenthe stops working once you watch the video." The screen shows a social media post: "Y'all Nepenthe was fine, til I watched this video 🥹🥹

😂 #feelit"

I swipe off the app.

I put my phone away and we're both silent. Zu looks at me and I look at her.

We have no words.

"How are you doing?" I ask.

Zu looks out the window, then at me.

"I'm good," she nods, then smiles.

We pass an intersection, where our Uber pulls toward the curb. A woman in a white jacket joins our ride, climbing into the front passenger seat. She has a striking presence. For a block or so, Zu and I observe her from behind.

The woman turns around casually.

"I saw your performance," she says, with clear, piercing eyes. "It really spoke to my heart."

"Oh," says Zu, surprised, "thanks."

I am captivated by her presence. Her eyes seem to radiate with clarity and purpose. "I was looking around the audience," the woman in white looks at Zu. "I think you touched some people."

"I wanted to," Zu says, honestly.

"Well, consider me a fan," the woman smiles. She hands us a white card, which Zu takes. "My name is Santiago. Look me up, if I can ever be of service."

She gives us a friendly glance. Our Uber pulls toward the sidewalk again, and Santiago quickly steps out.

We've hardly traveled five blocks together.

“Didn’t have far to go,” she winks at us, before literally disappearing in the busy New York street.

I look back out the window as we accelerate, sensing something important has happened.

But what?

“There’s no writing,” Zu says.

She flips over the card.

On the back side is an embossed white tree.

Zu moves her thumb over the texture.

“That’s pretty,” she turns to me.

I look down at the tree.

We’ve arrived at Trinity Rose.

I look out at the school, feeling weird butterflies in my stomach. “I hate Mondays,” I sigh. Zu gives my hand a squeeze, then turns up her lip.

“A deal is a deal,” she says.

We get out together, on the same side, then head toward the school. I see Hermes and Kimmo, standing by the entrance. Some of the other kids are starting to notice us. They are gathering around.

We go toward them.

ZU X ORI

THE REINCARNATION SEQUEL

TO SHAKESPEARE'S ROMEO + JULIET



A NOTE ON PUBLIC DOMAIN

The works of Homer, Shakespeare, and the stories of Sherlock Holmes, are so often “re-told” because they are in the public domain. No one is restricted, or needs to ask permission, to create new works from those stories. With traditional copyright, a period of time after the creator’s death must pass before their works enter the public domain. This protects creators’ income, but with the limitation that these stories and characters, no matter how beloved, can only be adapted by those who hold the rights.

There is something enriching about stories that belong to everyone. Where society can share common ground.

Where new storytellers can continue the tale.

So, if you are a creative person (and we all are) and resonate with Zu and Ori and their story, feel free to use some or all of this story in your own creations.

I look forward to what you make.

EVERY FUTURE HAS A PAST

