

Chapter 1

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

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

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

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

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

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

Arthur Miles smiles, his brows arched.

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

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

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

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

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

"Not exactly," he replies.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Arthur Miles cannot speak.

“Do you remember?” I ask again.

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

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

Chapter 2

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 3

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

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

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

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

The man waits, the door remains cracked open.

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

I look around the living room.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 4

What's with me? I wonder.

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

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

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

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

"Hi!" I exclaim.

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

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

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

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

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

"I see," Arthur nods, acting serious.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I approach him and take his hand.

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

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

Chapter 5

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

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

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

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

"You are right," he smiles.

"With regard to what?" I ask.

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

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

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

Arthur laughs, shaking his head.

"You're strange today," he says, and I shrug.

I am perfectly comfortable sitting beside this man.

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

I laugh, pretending I do.

"Yes we are. What about it?" I ask.

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

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

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

"I've always known," I say, and the realization dawns on me at the same time I voice it.

"You're crazy, but I care about you," Arthur says, taking my hand.

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

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

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

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

Arthur frowns and retreats his hand from mine.

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

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

"Gosh Iris, you really are crazy," he says.

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

"Tonight's the night," Arthur agrees, as a shiver runs through his body, subtle and yet detectable.

Chapter 6

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I see a broad extent of water.

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 7

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

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

Arthur observes the monastery, bugging his eyes.

"I cannot remember," he tells me.

I landscape the monastery, struggling to recollect our past.

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

“Are you scared too?” I want to know.

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

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

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

“Come on,” I echo, “let’s go.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Which trick?” Arthur asks.

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

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

I round my eyes in surprise.

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

I stare at Arthur with a clueless expression.

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

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

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

"This is the graveyard," Arthur tells me.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 8

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I am close to collapsing but I don't.

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

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

Chapter 9

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

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

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

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

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

Why?

"Take the book, Arthur," I say.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 10

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Uncle Ludwig...” I remember.

Chapter 11

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

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

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

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

"Arthur, are you ok?" I ask.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 12

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

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

“What time is it?” he mumbles.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Before or after?

Arthur gives me a confused look.

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

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

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

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

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

I have no answers to these questions.

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

"No," Arthur objects.

"Yes," I insist.

He gets up, laces my hands with his.

"Iris..." he says.

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

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

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

Chapter 13

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I am not.

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

“Yes I am. My apologies,” I reply.

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

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

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

“I’m Kathrine,” she says.

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

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

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

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

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

“Patience, Iris,” she says.

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

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

Chapter 14

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

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

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

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

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

“Always? How do you know?” I ask.

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

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

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

I shake my head no.

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

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

Kathrine nods encouragingly.

“Yes, and what else?” she insists.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Her face shivers through my tears.

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

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

Chapter 15

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

The potion. I remember the potion.

And I was with...Kathrine.

Mother.

Kathrine is mother.

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

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

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

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

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

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

I nod, tears suddenly pooling in my eyes.

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