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WRITING BLACK CHARACTERS OUT OF THE MARGINS OF FANTASY WITH SECRETS OF CANDEO

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WRITING BLACK CHARACTERS OUT OF THE MARGINS OF FANTASY
WITH SECRETS OF CANDEO

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English and Writing Studies

by
Julienne Kendall Parks
December 2021

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ABSTRACT

The crawling pace that the production of diverse fantasy books has set for itself continues to reveal that Black characters and the representation of Blackness in fiction is lacking in a detrimental way. Specifically speaking, this thesis focuses on the prevalent lack of Black characters in the fantasy genre, where Black people are cast as minor characters to a white protagonist's story like Angela Johnson from *Harry Potter*, cast as abominations of anti-Black stereotypes in monsters like the Uruk-hai of *Lord of the Rings*; and cast as side(kick) characters like Vetch from *Earthsea*, aka Black characters who are close to the white protagonist, yet their narrative arcs happen entirely outside the main plotline of the story and not in the pages. As a result, Black readers are being denied the chance to position themselves in fantasy; they are denied the choice to read about Black characters rising to the height of their ability and solving problems; and they are denied the comfort that they too can be magic like the (white) characters children of all ethnicities grew up reading about. Although there are published Black authors who actively write Black characters in fantasy stories, like Nnedi Okorafor, N.K. Jemisin, Tomi Adeyemi, and Marlon James to name a few; and although the Afrofuturism movement of the mid-1900s still works in this 21st century to place Black people in other worlds to blossom enjoyment in and grant escapism to Black readers, these books are still few compared to the vast representation of white people in fantasy, publishing avenues having put large gaps between releases of Black fantasy stories. It is

my feeling that reforming the genre can happen if Black authors perform responsive, active writing, meaning they are creating Black fantasy worlds and characters from a place of knowing what representation is out there already, what attitudes are standing against them, and what their plans are to diversify fantasy fiction with Black-positioned perspectives. By creating anyway and being determined to publish, Black authors will not only open the door for other Black authors of fantasy to be published but will also give Black readers the books they want to read, widening publishing's reach. In this thesis, I will assume the position of a Black author who has been given this reach via the production of an excerpt of my fantasy novel series, *Secrets of Candeo*, a novel series that positions my Blackness in a world where anything is possible, and the cast consists of Black characters who are agents in their own tale. Accompanying the excerpt is a contextualizing essay that places my excerpt in context with the conversations about Black characters, publishing, and the representation of Black people in fantasy. With excerpt and essay both, I scaffold a hope that the publishing and writing of Black fantasy stories will continue in fuller force and continue to bestow the ability to be meaningfully magic upon Black readers.

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Without you all, I would not be the writer, the person, the creative that I am today. Thank you and thank you.

DEDICATION

To every Black baby who wanted to be magic, I'm here to tell you that you
are.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

I began my escape into the fantasy genre at fourteen with games like *Dragon Age: Origins* where suddenly anything was possible; I could use magic, fight dragons, adventure, and save the world. I could design my playable character, the Warden and Hero of Ferelden, a choice that blossomed in me a palpable joy that I have yet to replicate as an adult. This character creator gave me permission to make my character look like me. I could make the character Black and as Black as I know myself to be.

Granted that the options were limited *Dragon Age: Origins* was my first time positioning myself, a Black person, in fantasy. The game supports a third-person camera angle, so watching my character, my *Black* character, make choices that advanced the plot and changed the outcome of the story was deeply appealing. With the game acting as an inciting incident for my imagination, I realized then that *I* could make fantasy stories myself where the characters had the mannerisms, features, practices, voices, and linguistic repertoire of the Black people in my communities, in church, my home, my school, the hood. Fantasy was endless. As I continued to interact with the fantasy genre, however, it came to my attention that this was not the case, and the genre itself was painfully white. The Black characters that were present were sidekick or villain to the white

protagonists, and the problematic trends of how Black people are represented in the fantasy genre were no longer unseeable.

I, as a Black person, am not represented by Yusef Kama, a French African villain in JK Rowling's *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, a wizard who swore an Unbreakable Vow to murder a child. Though I connected to Angela Johnson at first—Black girl of the brave, heroic house of Gryffindor, captain of the Quidditch team—she was watered down to be George Weasley's wife. Her epithets were made trinket, and none of her accomplishments mattered. Though I found another avenue to create Black characters in fantasy words, *Dungeons and Dragons*, its lore leaned on Black features and hairstyles like dreadlocks for their bad-natured orcs and rampageous half-orcs. The charcoal-skinned dark elf was the fair-skinned elegant high elf's evil half. And dungeon masters saw fit to give my Black characters a slave narrative where I never wrote one. I, a Black person, cannot escape into a narrative built upon the pain, racist oppression, and torture of my ancestors. I cannot escape into a world where anything is possible only to find my people are still marginalized in the sidelines of a white protagonist's story, or worse, in chains held by them.

Seeking out media featuring Black characters in fantasy will bring readers to books like Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018), Marlon James' *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* (2019), N.K. Jemisin's *The Fifth Season* (2014), and earlier books like Octavia Butler's *The Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Dawn* (1987). While these books have left such an impact as to be promoted across

online media, there are huge gaps in years between published Black fantasy books that make it this far. The collection of Black-led, Black-written fantasy stories is small compared to the complete library of white-led, white-written fantasy novels that have been churned out since John Ruskin's *The King of the Golden River* (1841) and George MacDonald's *The Princess and the Goblin and Phantasies* (1858). The Black-led, Black-written fantasy books that are out there and the representation of Black characters in traditional fantasy that is out there are but a dusting of breadcrumbs onto the plates of Black people who are starving to escape into other worlds. But the writing is happening. There are Black authors not yet published and Black authors who are deep in the complicated process to become published in these years-long gaps working to change the fantasy genre to feature more Black characters that matter to the story. They strive to put Black fantasy characters whose existences are not predicated on pain onto the tables of Black readers who seek them.

For this thesis, I am taking the position of a Black author who has been given the stage to be heard and to position Black characters and Blackness in fantasy. While I do not intend to make a perfect product, I have written the beginning chapters of a fantasy novel series, *Secrets of Candeo*, as an example of Black characters who are not in the sidelines or sidekick position of a white protagonist's story. Instead, the Black characters make up the entire cast, giving meat to my feeling that Black characters in Black-designed, Black-written worlds can and should be allowed the well-known elements of the fantasy stories so

many of us enjoyed as children. This must be accomplished by majority Black authorship, because Black authors write Black characters at their fullest. We know our features, mannerisms, and plans to incorporate ourselves into fantasy—as protagonists, side characters, anti-heroes, and (Black author-designed) antagonists and villains—best. Black fantasy authors can and should be given the space and power to come forward and share their work, because this dripping of Black people into white worlds along this timeline of diversifying genre books cannot change without them. The fantasy genre needs more color, more melanin, and when given the space, Black fantasy authors can make their magic happen.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Issue Amid the Publishing of Black Fantasy

Black fantasy protagonists do exist in our world at current, and they are well known to readers who seek Black-led, Black-written fantasy stories by searching online. N.K. Jemisin's *Inheritance Trilogy* (2010-11) follows Yeine Darr, a Black woman from a low-class tribe who becomes heiress to the throne of the Hundred Thousand Kingdoms and must play the game of politics against her older cousins to survive. Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018) follows Zélie Adebola, a young Black woman of a people for whom magic is still possible and powerful as she struggles against the crown prince who seeks to eradicate magic for good. Adeyemi's novel won acclaim, debuting as number one on the *New York Times* Bestsellers list. Nnedi Okorafor's *Akata Witch* (2011) of the *Nsibidi Scripts Series* follows Sunny Nwazue, an albino Black girl who uncovers her magic powers and is tasked, alongside three witches like her, to train their magic and capture a serial killer who possesses magic as well. *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* (2019) by Marlon James follows Tracker, a Black man leading a group of Black hunters to find the Leopard, a shapeshifting man-animal which proves to be a dangerous hunt filled with monsters and unending questions.

These books present amazing representation of Black-positioned perspectives, and they are often pitched to readers via online lists and

recommendations in Kindle stories. This is because average consumers do not often look to in-depth reviews for interesting books; they look to top results for lists of short descriptions that are easy to digest. The results show up as commercial sites or forums which provide quick and witty commentary to spark interest and encourage clicks. However, because of the fantasy genre's profound whiteness, white authors tend to be analog references to Black fantasy books. While this helps excite readers to these new, Black authors, it also presents the problem of overshadowing; these books above, with all their successes and promotion, are placed in conversation with white authors and their fantasy works to gain popularity and traction. They are not allowed to stand on their own.

Commercial sites and their lists are a main perpetrator of promoting Black stories with white names because of their manipulation of search engine optimization (SEO) to show up as top results. *Cosmopolitan's* "38 Best Books by Black Authors" (2021) positions James' book in 10th place. He is promoted with the words, "Raise your hands if you miss *Game of Thrones*", a white-led fantasy novel series by white author George R.R. Martin. *Game of Thrones* and *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* are both medieval fantasy novels, yet the plots are not the same; *Game of Thrones* navigates a Eurocentric cast battling for the Iron Throne through manipulation, corruption, and war. *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* is a twist on the mythology of the Leopard man in which a Black man is seeking this Leopard man out for a price. To promote this book as simply analog to *Game of Thrones* not only erases its uniqueness but also erases its Blackness and its more

specific African-ness. Another example is *Akata Witch*; this book is dubbed “The Nigerian Harry Potter” on *Popsugar’s* “Black Girl Magic Comes to Life in These 15 Mystical YA Books” list (2021). *Harry Potter* is a white-led magic fantasy series written by white author, JK Rowling. Though these books’ plots follow the similar mechanic of stopping a serial killer, *Akata Witch* goes to great lengths to incorporate Nigeria and Nigerian culture into a magic realm. Using *Harry Potter* as an analog for *Akata Witch* is another act of erasing the African-ness of this novel for the sake of promotion.

As Richard Jean So uncovers in his book navigating the topic of white author’s publishing privilege, white authors are favored by publishing houses in general; he finds that 97% of authors published by Random House in 2021 were white and two percent were Black (So 41). The difference in percentage is staggering. Based on this number, publishing houses pick and choose which Black authors will sell, meanwhile white authors are published with seemingly no issue. Two percent in 2021, a year where we are actively seeking more diverse books as social media hashtags like #ownvoices authors gain prominence and the We Need More Diverse Books movement continues to emerge is very telling of the lack of faith in Black fantasy books’ ability to sell in large publishing houses. Looking at the years of the Black fantasy books earlier in this section, the nearly 10-year gaps between publishing years gives credence to this notion that publishing houses trust white authors more than Black authors when it comes to selling novels. Black authors in general have yet to break meaningfully

into the mainstream, and more specifically Black fantasy authors have yet to break meaningfully into mainstream publishing; the truth makes itself out to be that only the Black fantasy books that are relevant to white authorship may receive the most promotion.

This favoritism is not new to Black writers of fantasy fiction; it has been in play since the mid-1900s with the Black Speculative Arts Movement and that movement's creation of the Black-led, Black-written creative genre, Afrofuturism. Afrofuturism as defined by Afrofuturist scholar Reynaldo Anderson is "an answer to the Eurocentric perspective" of genres like fantasy and its wider counterpart speculative fiction; Afrofuturism focuses on Black people in its "creative dialogue" with fantasy and sci-fi tropes (Anderson 228-229). The genre "integrates African diasporic or African metaphysics with science or technology" (231) when it leans into sci-fi as a genre to pull from. Afrofuturism, for as long as it has been alive, selects elements of the fantasy canon and positions Blackness and Black people within them, exploring Blackness as a worldbuilding and character creation mode as well as exposing white-positioned fantasy stories for their lack of attention to Black people. Mark Bould, another literary scholar, explains that this is important work for the genre to do, as Afrofuturism "not only [draws] attention to the ways in which [speculative fiction] has traditionally been constructed to privilege white American pulp-and-paperback and European literacy traditions but also, inextricably, to exclude [B]lack voices and [B]lack experience" (184). Afrofuturism, through the work aligned with it and defined by it, protests the

prevalence and favoritism toward white-led, white-written fantasy novels.

Afrofuturism acknowledges that favoritism and challenges and subverts the white occupation of the fantasy genre by creating spaces for Black voices and the Black experience to flourish. As an author myself, my goal for my work is to follow this way of thinking about creating Black fantasy stories; Afrofuturism knows what it is, what it represents, and what its goals are for enhancing the Black reader experience, and so do I. Just like Afrofuturism, my work speaks back to traditional white fantasy and speculative fiction, choosing to integrate Blackness and Black identities into the narrative, worldbuilding, and characters without the pressure of conforming to white tropes and white worlds. I can take the white-led molds of fantasy and break them to make new ones. *Secrets of Candeo*, *Akata Witch*, *Children of Blood and Bone*, *Black Leopard*, *Red Wolf*, and *The Inheritance Trilogy* may be promoted as kin to white fantasy novels at this time and in future; however, in their very pages, Blackness and modes of African-ness take over the entire page of these novels, leaving no room to doubt the presence of Blackness. The magic is there, and should Black authors continue to lean into Afrofuturism, they can continue to break the molds of fantasy to include more Black voices and Black experience. We must allow Black fantasy authors to continue to expand what is out there already by giving Black authors the space to create fantasy works that are not positioned in white worlds. More Black-written, Black-led fantasy books will shift our feet off the path of bad Black representation and the harm it does to Black readers and Black writers.

The Lessons Poor Representation Have Taught

Black authors are hurt by what the Black representation in white-led, white-written novels taught them as children. In his article, “Will Fantasy Ever Let Black Boys Like Me Be Magic?” Steven Underwood argues that Black characters in fantasy stories have become unintentional teaching tools to Black youth about their place in the world. As these characters are often sidekick or exotic other, “It told [Underwood] that even at the height of [his] power [he] should be in second place” (Underwood). He laments that this relegation to second best tells Black youth that they must move out of the way, even in worlds where everyone has access to the same power. He then asks, “What crown could I have if the best I could be was a sidekick?” (Underwood). As fantasy continues to exclude Black authors and their characters, as fantasy continues to present itself as a “whites only” genre, the answer is no crown at all. Black people are being denied fantasy’s teachings of “values and critical literacy”, claims scholar Yolanda Hood (Hood). She agrees with Underwood that the state of Black representation in the fantasy genre as it exists in white-written, white-led fantasy books is a teaching tool that Black readership and specifically Black youth are consistently failed by. She asks, “Where were Black girls who fed dragons, petted unicorns, or slept in castles?” in her article examining race in recent sci-fi and fantasy novels for young adults (Hood). Without fantasy novels that are led and written by Black people, Black youth are denied “an opportunity to explore what their world might

be like in the future while portraying a future that is an accurate representation of the array of brown people within the global community” (Hood). Without worlds with narrative elements that Black readers can connect to; without stories with Black characters who share Black experience and have diverse Black experience, Black readership and Black youth are being marginalized and left out of the educational benefits of escapism. They are only allowed what is popular, which limits their choice of worlds to explore and what problems they can see themselves solve. This lack ultimately informs Black youth that they are incapable of greatness outside of what whiteness can do for them and give them. That Black youth see themselves marginalized in worlds where anything is possible, they continue to be taught that they are subservient directly or indirectly to white people. “To be marginalized is to not be given permission to be fully human,” Underwood explains. Should the fantasy genre continue to poorly represent Black people, Black readers themselves will never escape the margins and will be inhuman and other in the eyes of fantasy.

Helen Young finds that this whites-only position the fantasy genre upholds persists because the practice of writing fantasy from a Euro-centric perspective deems anything challenging the white norm as abnormal or unrealistic. Even with historical evidence of Black people living in the medieval periods from which most fantasy derives its worldbuilding, their presence in these stories still does not “feel real” to readers, and any voices decrying this argument are met with verbal abuse. In Young’s article, she demonstrates this through Tumblr user

@medievalpoc's account of the danger she was put in by speaking out against the poor treatment of people of color in medieval fantasy. She was targeted by white fantasy readers for explaining and evidencing the historical accuracy of people of color living and thriving in the Middle Ages. @medievalpoc had shown that the "historically accurate" game, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (2018) set in Bohemia could feasibly have racially and culturally diverse characters. She provided historical and academic evidence showing photos, paintings, and accounts of people of color living in the Middle Ages (233), and this led to her direct messages being flooded with threats on her life. That *Kingdom Come* was imperfect because it excluded people of color was not only unfeasible to white fantasy enjoyers but also a slight on the very name of the genre that they enjoy. Young deems @medievalpoc's entire situation a sign that "a straightforward desire for realism—a reflection of the historical world as it likely would have been—cannot be at the heart of the problem" (235). The reality is that prejudice refuses to position people of color, especially Black people, in fantasy.

What is "real" is that Black characters are "transient, isolated figures or invading enemies with narrative justification for their (usually temporary) presence" compared to the "natural and narratively unremarked" presence of white people (Young 238). Young demonstrates that white heroes are given Black enemies by analyzing *Lord of the Rings*, where "in Middle-earth, the 'good' races—elves, dwarves, and humans—are constructed through references to European cultures and peoples" (239). The enemies across the films and 20 plus

video games—the militant, subservient, savage orcs—are racialized; “The Uruk-hai embody anti-Black stereotypes with their height, black skin, hair that resembles dreadlocks” (240), stereotypical “savage” dress, and their inability to speak English without growling like predators, that is if they are “intelligent” enough to speak. The orcs are born from dark magic and emerge from tar, likening their skin tone to evilness and filth as well, presenting another anti-Black stereotype about Black peoples’ cleanliness.

In fantasy stories, game or novel, Black characters and Black people are the enemy and not just servant or sidekick as Underwood points out. They hold the opposite power of Black-led, Black-written fantasy novels that Hood says will give Black readership the escapism and heightened critical thinking that the fantasy genre exemplifies. Though Afrofuturism exists to push back against this narrative, many fantasy stories where Black characters are positioned poorly and offensively cause more harm than Afrofuturism can bandage. Black characters are still to be gated into the margins with prejudice, aggression, and subservience to white masters and to be ultimately dehumanized as monsters. Black readership made aware of these trends in fact mourn that their Blackness must be monstrous, good or evil, to pass and even be published. We need to not only push more Black authors who write Black fantasy novels into the public eye but also to denounce the current state of representation to make a way for Black characters and Black authors to escape the margins.

What Underwood, Hood, and Young are saying in synthesis is that though there may be spaces made for Black characters to exist, the practice of bad representation is what sticks in fantasy readership, fantasy authors, and the genre itself because it is that: a practice. There is power in repetition. Repeatedly invoking the same sidekick and othered visuals of Black characters in fantasy and consistently rehashing harmful designs and thoughtless machinations perpetuates the “if it’s not broken, don’t fix it” perspective that is detrimental to Black readership and Black writers of fantasy. Black representation in the fantasy genre at current in traditional fantasy is a product that may seem different on the surface, but it is a product still controlled by the whites only perspective. The control over the fantasy genre the whites only perspective has leads to the gates being kept up even as moves are being made toward better Black representation. Black writers seeking to change this narrative around Black characters are working double time to put out a new practice that presents Black characters in fantasy as full, as complex, and as *agents* in the narratives that Black authors wish they had as children.

Why Fantasy Matters and How Black Pain Can Become Power

Jack Zipes, a scholar who focuses on fantasy stories and why fantasy matters as a genre argues that the process of creating fantasy stories is important to changing and engaging with the world. He writes, “It is through fantasy that we have always sought to make sense of the world, not through

reason” and it is the fantasy genre’s power of influence that its “fictive projections of our imaginations based on personal experience that we have sought to grasp, explain, alter, and comment on reality” (Zipes 78). Fantasy stories and the practice of writing them is illustrative of the process in which creative minds engage with the world around them. In the fantasy writing realm, we can delve into mystery, adventure, and craft solutions to conflicts that are based in real life struggles, like the sense of belonging, coming of age, solving murders, saving the environment. Fantasy allows writers to amplify these issues to grasp their severity and fulfill our internal desire to be able to answer our fears with power and hope. By doing the work, whether that be through Afrofuturism or by positioning Black people within traditional fantasy worlds from a Black-positioned perspective that knows what needs to change, Black fantasy authors can find their power and their hope for better by creating what that Black-led, Black-written fantasy story may look like for themselves. They can find their power, they can hope that anything is truly possible in the fantasy realm by continuing to denounce anti-Black narratives and bad Black representation in addition to writing Black fantasy characters into those good, traditional roles of hero and protagonist, eventually overwriting what is considered real and unreal in the fantasy genre. The pain does not have to hinder the advancement of better Black representation in traditional fantasy.

There is scholarship suggests that the pain of bad representation of Black people in traditional fantasy can be turned into a force of encouragement for

Black fantasy writers. There is a power in facing the challenge as much as there is power in repetition; inner pain can become outer inspiration to drive Black fantasy authors to write through what Darieck Scott calls responsive, active writing. He argues that fantasy is highly significant to “the very process of the relation between the real and unreal, between the inner and outer, a process (or *the* process) which is inherent *to* the world as the world, and which constitutes the world, or at least the world as human beings move in it and are of it” (Scott 344). Connecting the inner and outer worlds is the double-edged sword of the fantasy genre when it comes to Black characters. While it may hurt to recognize that the representation Black readership has consumed all these years has caused harm to their engagement with the fantasy genre and the very world itself, it is still possible to create better modes of engagement with fantasy that Black readership can relate to and see themselves in. The blade of bad representation cuts us deep, but it can carve and transform the genre into a tool for meaning making and self-discovery. When Black people and the black experience are present in the hope-filled and endless worlds fantasy stories weave, it gives Black readers what Hood claims they are missing. It becomes possible that Black readers see that problems have solutions through the Black characters’ internal struggle to find themselves and the external struggle against a great evil or challenge. Their inner hope of success becomes greater because a Black author who experienced the pain of bad representation used that hurt and turned it into magic for a Black reader to hold. Writing actively against bad

Black representation can subvert the harm of what bad Black representation in fantasy stories cause. We need to know what we're responding to—the harm of bad Black representation in the fantasy genre—and activate our own power to write against it. Black writers can take elements of our world, concepts, studies, cultures, and mythos and converse with them through creativity and imagination, processing the real and unreal through a creative force, challenging and cutting against the grain of traditional fantasy portrayals of Black people.

Fantasy's white-positioned perspective can be significantly altered over time to feature more Black voices and Black experiences if Black writers continue to practice what Scott calls Black fantasy, a fantasy that “does not look at [B]lackness from a white-defined outside” and is a mode of creation “in despite of hegemonic power” (Scott 345). The goal is to be informed and write anyway. A Black author who knows why bad Black fantasy representation exists and who engages with other Black voices working to change the state of fantasy's representation of Black people is pivotal to transforming the narrative. Black authors who write to reinvent the fantasy genre to better represent Black people do so to claim space. By claiming space in the fantasy genre and using that space—tropes, worldbuilding elements, meaning, plotlines—to alter the course, the fantasy genre will have no choice but to change. Black characters in fantasy that are not other, sidekick, monster, or chimaera—that are *human* and *humanized* can meaningfully emerge and better yet, break out of the margins and claim the entire page as their own story. The power of practice changes

perception, which is a pivotal point as to why this thesis exists. By writing a fantasy story excerpt from my Black positioned perspective, I am challenging the norms of popular culture; I am putting into play Black characters who are human, who are facing unnatural odds in another world, but they are agents working to change those odds to their favor. By doing the writing, I am putting into practice the change I want to see: a Black-positioned perspective to traditional fantasy.

CHAPTER THREE

ANALYZING THE EXCERPT

The excerpt I have provided is the first five chapters of a passion project of mine, *Secrets of Candeo*. The series navigates the adventures of twelve curious minds as they traverse their world to uncover the secrets their government and historians have gone to great lengths to seal away. We follow the Black protagonist, Noah, who has not seen the world but knows all its history; he meets Alleluia, a Black man who has seen much of the world except for these 14 Secrets that he is driven to uncover, because infamy and adventure are what push him forward and give his life meaning. When describing these characters, I include descriptors that directly nod to Black human features, because that is who they are: Black humans simply written in a world that is not Earth. Some basic features I include when describing the characters are full lips, unique noses, cheekbones, skin, and hair. These are visual codes for non-white features that assist in visualizing Black people for my readers.

I found hair to be a very important aspect of character design to incorporate into the descriptions of the cast in text. Tabitha's hair is described as an afro (Parks 52, 68), Zavian's hair is braided and adorned with gold clips (64), Alleluia's hair is "thick and dark and coiling, smelling of intoxicating oils" (72), and Noah is described as having dreadlocks, "long, winding sections of hair" of a red and black gradient (40). Dreadlocks are a commitment of patience and love in

Black communities, and instead of placing them in a monstrous light, such as with the *Lord of the Rings* and *Dungeons and Dragons*' orcs, I cast them in a light of natural affection. This sets the stage for further descriptions of Noah's relationship to his hair as well, such as when Noah finds shame in the excessively frizzy nature of his once well-kept locks after weeks of not tending to them; when he laments missing his palm-rolling, the practice of moisturizing and locking in new growth to keep the dreadlocks healthy; and, in his constant, anxious pulling of his dreadlocks as he works obsessively to uncover the truth of his prophesized death; "Part of one he pulls comes off, the remainder like a frayed candle, and it sinks his heart" (56). Noah's hair becoming frayed and frizzed from worry where it was once beautiful, long, and winding is a point of pain for him, one he tries to avoid. And Tabitha, who knows this about Noah, begs to do his hair for him like always (53); this act in Black communities is a bonding experience between Black people that goes deeper than cutting and styling, as it takes up to 12 hours to take care of Black hair in one sitting. This is a lot of time spent together, enjoying the process through conversation, gossip, watching a movie, more. Black people have a very strong relationship with their hair; it is a labor of love to use hair masks, specialized curl texture combs, braiding techniques, testing products to find one's hair type match, keeping a scheduled wash day, a chosen time to dedicate to detangling, keeping a style and watching for unintentional messiness, and so on. Incorporating this aspect of Black life into Noah's engagement with the world not only shows how the conflict

is affecting his agency but how it is also affecting the aspects of himself that mean something to him and by extension, Black readers.

Another aspect that affects Black people at an emotional depth is our skin; Noah's skin is described as black in the beginning when he is padding to the entryway to meet with the Vault of Heaven (Parks 38). In Chapter Two, as the fear of his death continues to unfurl him, Noah's brown skin is described as dry and chapped, and it is one of the first things he thinks of as unkempt when Tabitha mentions he looks horrible. Skin care is important to Black people because it is another aspect of our natural design that we cherish on a level of worship; the body is a temple, and it is a packed image for Black readers when one describes brown skin as dry. Growing up with it ingrained into us that being dry-skinned or "ashy" is taboo, we can picture the very visible gray cast over dark skin in our mind's eye, feel the tension of dry skin and itchy pain of chapped skin, and sense the anxiety of being seen so dry by family, friends, and strangers alike. Ultimately, this is an indicator I found important to include and an important description to show Noah's Blackness and how it is being troubled by his fear of his death. Non-Black readers may also relate to the discomfort of dry skin; however, combining this with Noah's Blackness is key for showing the Black-positioned perspective I am aiming for in the excerpt.

I found it equally important to include descriptions of Black skin that Black people can pick up on and relate to. When we talk of Black skin, we avoid words that describe our skin as food; this adds to the othering effect that we see in

traditional fantasy, where exotic, Black-coded people have “mocha” colored skin and “chocolate” colored skin. Avoiding the use of simple descriptors like “dark” without any other description also helps in defining different types of Black skin, as dark is too vague as a standalone term and can be interpreted as anything darker than pale, even slightly. To be compared to food is detrimental to the Black reading experience, and to be given a vague description such as “dark” for skin removes the opportunity to better describe Black skin and speak to a variety of skin tones. I exemplify this most in the side characters/the characters in the excerpt besides Noah and Alleluia, describing them with skin tones that speak to Black people; Tabitha has vitiligo which is described as brown and pink (52, 68), Chevelure is written to have medium-brown skin, Zavian is said to have deep brown skin (64), and Tsillah is described as having “a deep mahogany brown face” (95). Being specific when it comes to skin, refraining from “dark” as the descriptor and avoiding food terms offers an impactful description of the characters themselves that seals in the idea that I am writing about Black people. Black readers may see their skin tone among the characters that I’ve depicted, giving them a moment to connect to the characters’ descriptions and how they embody Black elements of being. Black hair, Black skin, Black practices, and known Black features presented as natural aspects of character design normalizes that Black people exist and thrive in this world different from our own Earth, a world I have created where anything is possible.

I chose not to follow my published predecessors' paths and look to African and/or African diasporic cultures and mythology while developing Candeo for *Secrets of Candeo*. Such elements are intrinsic to classic and current Afrofuturism; the genre extends Earth into a future/other world where technology is positioned in Blackness and where African mythology and African cultures are present in the world design and character creation. My reasoning for avoiding this worldbuilding path is simply because I am not African. I am Black with Haitian Creole in my blood; however, I have no connection to that part of my culture due to it being lost as my family migrated to California. My grandmother and great grandmother were shut tight about their history, with good reason, I assume. Thus, I didn't reach for African mythology or any African cultures to extend into a fantasy world. Instead, I looked to the concepts of western astrology. The Zodiac signs, horoscopes, the 12 Astrological Houses, and the degree system astrology utilizes for measuring time and reading the stars are a few concepts I applied to my building of Candeo. While this is a system many people of different ethnicities and creeds look to for fun or for spiritual guidance, I find through my personal experience that it is something I can connect to as a Black person; spirituality has proven itself important to me and my Black peers, and the guidance of horoscopes has influenced our daily paths and has informed us about others on a level deeper than face value or that can be achieved through conversation. By bringing that connection into this fantasy world and connecting the Black characters to it, I still position Blackness in a world outside

our own. Black people who also connect to western astrology can see the connections in the worldbuilding, finding another element of the story that they can position themselves in.

The magic system for Candeo leans on beliefs of the cosmos in western astrology as an organic being that influences life choices and uncontrolled life occurrences. The Vault of Heaven, for example, is described as a giant tree of magic, wood, and stone by Alleluia in Chapter Three:

So here Alleluia stands at the base of the grand tree of stone, magic, and time, Candeo's Keeper, the Vault of Heaven. It is wide like a city, "roots" winding like those of an old tree that has existed before time. He stands firmly on the ground, his gaze cast up the mighty trunk that continues into the swirling bodies of space and stars that form the tree's canopy, or at least what he can see of it without falling over. The Vault of Heaven seems to thrust up into the atmosphere and into space; a spire piercing past the clouds, into nothing. (Parks 63)

Time and magic/cosmos existing in living material like stone and wood creates a connection between the mystical and the biological, much like how Black people connect their living selves to the mystical nature of the cosmos as it is viewed and experienced in western astrology. Also, the canopies of the Vault of Heaven are described as swirling bodies of space and stars; the Vault of Heaven's "leaves" in this way are of a mystical nature that draws the eye and draws the

cosmos to the Vault of Heaven. There is a gravitas, a spiritual welcome and unity, between the cosmos that makes up the physical Vault of Heaven and further influences the area around it to accept its roots, its living material as a natural effect of time and organic growth. It's a type of biological magic at play. The idea of biological magic has always inspired me when it comes to creating worlds, an idea I gathered from *Dragon Age* and *Dungeons and Dragons*. I morphed it into something intrinsic to Candeo as a world and as something the characters can interact with and see, like Black astrologers who read the cosmos for its effect on organic material and on people.

Another aspect of worldbuilding I find important to discuss is the time construction. As I have experienced and worked within it, time measurement in western astrology determines which Zodiac sign's "season" it is (Scorpio season vs. Aquarius season), which planet is in retrograde (Mercury retrograde, Venus retrograde), which planet is in which sign (Leo is in Venus, Taurus is in Pluto), and which sign is in which Astrological House (Libra in House II, Capricorn in House VII). These different classifications of time indicate which principles of astrology are to be read and summed up for people who have these placements in their birth charts. I pay attention to these things, as spirituality and world energy effect my everyday experience, and keeping these things in mind help organize my thoughts and how to prepare myself for the day's predictions. Most of these shifts happen within 30 days and within 30 degrees of celestial measurement, indicating a set period and space to commune with and remember

on a day to day. For example, if I know that Mercury is in retrograde, I can expect communication and my interpersonal relationships, whether that be with work, family, or friends to be affected by this in an eye-opening way, and it is often very rough about how the effects come about. If a Zodiac sign has changed houses, I can expect what the house symbolizes to commune with who I am and what I am becoming for that 30-day period. It's a lifestyle to include the houses, planets, and star signs and how they intersect and interact in conversation with each other and myself.

I incorporate my connection to western astrology's idea of time into Candeo to create the experience of looking to the cosmos and time for answers. I show this in Chapter Two, the chapter following Noah receiving the prophecy that he will face a cruel death: "Time has even changed houses twice" during Noah's search (Parks 47). Houses in Candeo are the equivalent of months; they are 30 days long, calling back to the fact that Zodiac signs change houses and seasons month to month. That time has changed houses twice means Noah has been searching for answers to his prophecy for two months. He's aware of the time change in a way that panics him; the longer it takes him to find the truth to his prophecy, the bleaker his situation becomes for him. I convey that panic as well in Chapter Two when I write that Noah has spent "days, decans—houses" sifting through information (60). I create a sense of urgency with the comma and dash as well as a sense of pressure and shortness of breath, embodying how changes in astrological time can affect Black astrology followers abruptly. Some changes

in sign seasons, houses, and planets cause different emotions to come into play during each set of 30 days and can be jarring. Tying Noah's panic to time is illustrative of how deeply Black people feel when the shifts in astrological season and house reveal difficult truths and put them through difficult emotional experiences. Time matters to the plot and lives in the mind and actions of the protagonist and accomplishes what a lot of authors hope to achieve in a magical world. The time mechanic effecting the characters means it matters and it is lived in. Noah is tied so closely to how time affects his psyche, and there is a sense of importance built within the narrative that readers can pay attention to.

I write the magic system of Candeo as affecting multiple areas of the human consciousness, such as touch, sight, thought, and sound. Noah can hear the magic of the Vault when he visits it at night to breathe alongside it and see cosmic stars behind his eyelids in Chapter One. The group of five later in the excerpt can see the magic down in the Roots of the Vault of Heaven, where the water glows a vibrant teal in Chapter Five. Alleluia, Chevelure, and Zavian feel the cosmos at their backs, pushing them forward when they arrive at the Vault of Heaven in Chapter Three. They walk through magic clouds and step into the entryway of the Vault of Heaven in the same chapter. When Noah begins his divination of time, each time he projects into another space the sensations are described as if physical, such as "shoving" against a solid surface when he enters a divination space and "pulling" (Parks 44) energy from within and applying it out to help force the push. The magic is both within and outside of the

characters' control, and what this does is illustrate that while the cosmos is something we can connect to, the cosmos is also its own entity that breathes as the characters do. It has its own agency as much as it allows the Black people in Candeo to have agency in their world. This is the type of magic and the type of becoming magic that Black fantasy readers seek to indulge in when they enter these worlds. It takes a concept Black readers can relate to, astrology, and shows that it has the possibility of power, a power that can be placed in their very hands. To see characters that look and behave like Black people being, doing, and experiencing magic, Black readers will be able to bond with the characters and see they are capable of power in this world. Their power is not sideline or other.

The most important aspect of this excerpt is that the protagonist is a Black person. Protagonists, by definition, are the characters that drive the plot forward. To give a Black character agency and the protagonist role is an invitation for Black readers to find belonging in the pages. It shows that yes, Black people exist here, and they act, and their actions have meaning. To show that not only is Noah Black but he has power to move the plot provides that kind of escapism that I enjoyed while playing *Dragon Age: Origins* for the first time. Making the Black character act and be magic in a way that changes the world completes the Black-positioned perspective I believe Black fantasy is capable of, giving Black readers the chance to engage with the lasting influence that a protagonist journey holds. For Noah, his choice to leave his room, go to the entryway, and

breathe with the Vault of Heaven is described as a practice/ritual that he has each night. His choice to continue that practice puts him in a position to introduce the coming conflict to the readers in Chapter One, leading to the inciting incident, the trigger to the events that follow.

The Vault overwhelms him with its prophecy:

“What’s wrong?” Noah asks, begging for specifics. “Why are you crying? Please, tell me—”

With how the Vault cries, Noah does not expect an answer.

But he receives one. In a voice without a sound, the Vault weeps:

I fear for you, sweet seedling. The cruelty of this world will seek you soon. And I weep because I cannot save you from its evil.

(Parks 42).

The Vault of Heaven speaks to Noah through their cosmic connection, and in doing so, expresses a fear for him that becomes his own fear in a way that makes him desperate. Desperation is a human emotion that leads to mistakes and impulsive choices, and desperation and fear of this unknown, horrific event is what leads to Noah’s next actions. In the following pages, Noah attempts to use his powers against the rules of said powers to find the truth:

He has only ever been trained to reach back, never forward. But his anxious mind, his increasing fear of the unknown, needs some respite. If his divination skill is meant to find history, to pull from the

cosmos above, around, within the events that fill the blanks in their recordings, reaching into the future just a bit cannot be that much different. Though the idea that cruelty would find him soon sets panic deep into his bones, it gives him drive to go against what he knows and learn what horror awaits him.

He must try. (44)

His powers are meant to read history, not the future. He has been trained throughout his formative years that only history is attainable. However, by making this choice to seek the future, Noah seals for himself that this prophecy is going to be his conflict. The stakes are that his life is threatened, and to find the truth is to break the rules and throw himself into the work of uncovering the truth. This is illustrated in his downward spiral in Chapter Two as well, where he works tirelessly to not only break the barrier of the future, but to scour the histories he has been taught to seek out for all information about deaths, horrors, and misfortunes that his people, the Quill society, may have faced. Noah's conflict is not solely internal (Noah versus his normal) but also external (Noah versus the truth), putting him at the opposing seat of what is causing his stakes to rise and his engagement with what he has known to change dramatically.

What is also important to the protagonist role is that there are underlying desires; these desires show themselves as a conflict within the conflict. Noah has an underlying desire that his foil and narrative opposite, Alleluia, is already experiencing. Noah wants to know the truth of the world he lives in, to see the

world he lives in for himself, and to learn of its secrets. Alleluia being his narrative opposite means he has seen the world and been of the world, as illustrated in Chapter Three:

Alleluia Noceur of the Orlaith has sailed the islands of Serendipity, Candeo's Treasurer, where the gems that make up the stars used for trade reside, their beds cradled in bioluminescent stone only the most skilled of geomancers can mine. He has scaled the Luminaries in Namika, Candeo's Trident, mountains that kiss the auroras. There he has uncovered the Stardust Caverns, those caves of old secluded and secretive that hold primordial scripture of the first worshipers of the cosmos. He has encountered many charybdi in the Shield Country Kairos's whirlpools and won, he has traveled the great plains of the Sickle Country Cystenina on dragon hound back. He has taken part in the Dies Irae, the Days of Wrath in the Country of Kings, Adira and its Coliseum, the Great Void.

(61)

While using this paragraph to show that Alleluia is not only well-traveled, but also that this world is not of Earth and is its own space, readers can see that Alleluia has something Noah wants: freedom. Noah wants to leave the Vault of Heaven as his underlying desire, and he battles with this because no Quill has left the Vault and survived. Yet at the same time, Noah finds that within the histories, no Quill has tried to survive the outside or had the willpower. He knew that the Vault

is the safest place for him, yet once he received that prophecy, he questions it. He is constantly asked by his vision that came from his divination into the future, “You want to get out of here, don’t you?” and when Alleluia voices that question in Chapter Four, it’s a shock to Noah and drums up that underlying desire to see the world for himself. Noah’s ultimate goal is finding the truth, and underlying that goal is freedom *to* find the truth for himself. This complex interest and hope led Noah to choose to work with Alleluia in Chapter Four to retrieve the maps to the Secrets of Candeo from the Roots:

That, in Noah’s vibrant eyes, is a *spark*.

A spark Alleluia finds himself ready and willing to entertain.

He barks another laugh, but he does not look away from Noah. Not even for a second.

“You want to get out of here, don’t you?” Alleluia asks Noah.

The Quill straightens his back. That spark alights into a fire.

Noah nods. He nods quickly. (85-86).

Noah’s desire to leave is affirmed in him and affirmed to readers at this stage of the story. He has been battling with it all this time, but now he has made his choice. Even written from another character’s perspective, it is Noah’s choice that leads to the events of Chapter Five, the climax of the excerpt. Noah’s existence in the story is why the plot moves, and his choices ensure movement into the next chapter.

Black characters, Black protagonists that make moves in their own worlds and stories is the kind of magic that makes escaping into fantasy realms so important. To be human is to have control over your own body and your life and creating Black characters in fantasy that are agents of their own change, positioned in worlds designed to include them as complex and natural entities is an act of humanizing Blackness and Black people. Humanizing Black people in fantasy fiction allows Black readers to see someone who looks like them and feel a connection deeper than following a white or non-Black protagonist through the same adventure. There is magic in reading about Black people doing what Black readers have been denied in the repeated installations of bad or at least lacking representation written by white and non-Black hands.

The magic is the ability to say, "There I am, and I can be magic."

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

The call for more Black characters positioned in fantasy stories who have agency, presence, and magic is, at its core, a hope. There is so much humanness, creativity, and diverse experience in Blackness that traditional fantasy woefully ignores. And with so few Black fantasy novels and Black speculative fiction books out there that receive similar promotion to that of their white counterparts, there is much, much more work to be done. Publishers and popular culture need to open the door for the authors and specifically the Black authors who write Black characters outside the margins. Black writers given the opportunity to write their Black characters in worlds they, as Black people, have designed can create the experience of escapism for Black readers that encompasses the importance of fantasy as a meaning making object and an object of hope itself. Black characters in Black fantasy show that though there are trials, there are also solutions, and we, as Black people hold the power to change the course of the trial and save the day. Our own days included.

I took this thesis as my chance to show that by doing the writing, by giving a Black person the chance to do the active, responsive writing to the issue of Black representation in the fantasy genre, it is possible to see the creativity that can come from a Black mind positioning Blackness in a fantasy world. I weaved a fantasy story that comes from a Black-positioned perspective through this

excerpt from the greater project that is *Candeo*. It is a hope of mine that one day I will be published alongside the works of Tomi Adeyemi, Nnedi Okorafor, Octavia Butler, N.K. Jemisin, Marlon James, Rivers Solomon, and more Black authors of speculative fiction/sci-fi/fantasy. At the same time, I want to be different from them as well; I don't want to mimic their success but make my own. I want to bring to the table a perspective of Blackness that comes from the aspects of Black culture that we may not consider magic on the surface. *Secrets of Candeo* is a love letter to astrology and how it manifests, guides, and embodies my reality. I have stories planned that explore how Black people's relationship to music and dance can manifest as and within a magical world. I have stories in mind where a Black girl faces demons while blinded, putting into imagination how my poor eyesight effects my engagement with the world around me. I want to join my fellow Black fantasy authors and Black Afrofuturist authors out there who write about magic and power with the magic of the personal. It is my hope that as more Black fantasy perspectives get published it becomes possible for more diverse Blackness emerge.

My project hopes for more Black people that can perform Black practices and be Black in worlds that are magic and changeable by Black people and Black hands. My project shows that Blackness is experienced diversly. Incorporating my Black experience into this project academically and creatively gives me a voice on the stage of Black fantasy. There will be Black people who find kinship in my characters and my world, and there will be Black people whose

tastes are not met in my books, which, in of itself, is a success. Because it gives Black people a choice. With more books out there from more diverse Black perspectives, Black people will be given the agency to decide which worlds will become their escape and their place of joy. This project culminates as a hope that more Black voices will be able to publish their Black-led, Black-written fantasy novels, and it stands as a hope that Black people will be able to choose more than one type of magic they want to be in time.

APPENDIX
SECRETS OF CANDEO

NOAH

The Vault takes its first breath at night. To witness it is to stand on the ground floor in the Vault of Heaven's entryway, close one's eyes, and wait for the zenith star to cross where the azimuth has just been.

Noah never misses it. In fact, he has ruined his sleep schedule to ensure that he is wide awake when it happens. It has become important to him; a priceless part of his rituals is to visit the ground floor where his world becomes the most natural.

It may be odd, but Noah considers the Vault of Heaven his close friend. Family. He has known no other place than the Vault, the world of Candeo's divine keeper, and while the people who live within its organic, yet stoic walls communicate with one another and provide company, it is not the same connection. As far back as he can remember—or more accurately reach back through cosmic time, Noah has been able to hear the Vault come alive when the zenith's light dims, leaving Candeo's skies an ambient, deep purple hue freckled with starlight. He has been told by visitors that the same color makes up his eyes. Noah's hands had barely begun to hold pens when he resonated with the Vault's first breath for the first time, and now as a young nonbinary of twenty-two, he continues to resonate.

Other than that, it is an isolated existence within the Vault. Nothing to engage meaningfully with but the books and time. Noah's only chances to glance at the outside are when travelers, scholars, officials, and similar folk enter to seek

the aid of the Vault's society, the Quills. The windows in the Vault only ever overlook the galactic swirling seas of the Midheaven, waters Noah has, during his growing years, thought the only living, natural aspect of the world outside. This and the sky moving from its morning pastels to the day's vibrant hues, the evening's richness to the night's complete cover. If not for the spheres upon spheres of history the Quills store in the Vault's many floors, Noah would have continued to believe it.

But at night? Noah does not seek the natural world beyond what the Vault shows him. There is a part of him in his core that craves just the night hour when the cosmos around, within, beneath, above the Vault of Heaven merely exists for the sake of it. To breathe. He feels a kinship with these hours, the closest with the first breath the Vault takes at night. It is something to hold dear when you are not a question, but part of the answer.

Noah takes the stairs down from his chambers, floating sconces emitting moon-white light softly on the black wood steps. His bare black feet hit tile, the polished floor smooth and deep blue, and he pads the walkways between the tall bookcases that press against the ceiling. Warm light from the constellation painting above reveals the books on the shelves, histories of magic, codices of the monstrous, and teachings of the arcane in their most current renditions; the deeper history emerges the higher the Vault goes. There is a straight shot path from the Quill chambers to the entryway, but Noah prefers weaving his way

around and through different aisles, like a maze. Finding new ways to the front each time is like winning a game when he makes it.

Noah reaches the round entryway, surrounded by twelve decorative doors that lead to study and conference rooms equidistant from each other. It is here where Noah finally stops, looking down to be captivated by the star map speaking of travel in the twists and turns of its rose gold lines. With a careful combination of cosmos and magic, this spot teleports visitors to the outside of the Vault of Heaven—there is a path up, but not down—wiping from their mind the way they come inside to protect the Vault's secrets.

Noah tucks his dreadlocks behind his ears, the long, winding sections of hair an ombre of red to jet black down his back; he closes his eyes, red and black lashes kissing his broad cheekbones so he cannot just witness the first breath but hear it and feel its thrum. His senses synthesize on more than just this one type of occasion; Noah feels the world differently, beautifully, according to the Quill society. The life of a synesthete.

As Noah relaxes, his hands gently cupping his neck, he feels the soothing, rising vibration of the cosmos. The Vault is humming, but no breaths yet. He smiles ever so softly as the humming brings colors in clouds and smoke paths to his vision, as his skin feels its caress and sweet hold. A greeting from a friend.

“Hello,” Noah whispers, his smile spreading just that bit wider. He receives no response yet, but he does feel the Vault still and quiet. It is time.

It is just as he expects at first; behind his eyelids it is as though stars, white-gold and brilliant come down from the shadows and nestle at his feet, much like what the histories have shown him of leaves when they fall free from their branches and rest on the earth below. He waits as they settle, holding his own breath. Then when they rise, he inhales, the stars soaring up in a swell like Noah's lungs in his chest.

He revels in it. That awakening first breath.

The hues of blues, reds, and purples that make up the cosmic colors he sees and senses emerging in full, the stars reclaiming their places in the night as it becomes theirs, the Vault's, and Noah's eyes behind his eyelids.

But something is different. Noah notices it almost immediately. When Noah and the Vault of Heaven sigh their first sigh, the hot wet of tears slip from Noah's lashes and down his dark skin in tendrils. The Vault's own breath trembles. A rush of sadness comes over Noah, an uncanny surge of emotion different to what he expects to feel each night he spends breathing with the Vault until rest finds him and urges him to bed. And the Vault of Heaven feels it, too. His poor friend.

Noah has cried here before. The Vault has cried with him to soothe him. But never together have they shared a moment of such deep pain and mourning that Noah crumples to the floor, weeping into his knees.

What has happened?

Why does it hurt so much to breathe?

These questions flurry in Noah's mind and he picks at his memory, his knowledge, his history for the answer. As he looks and looks, the Vault of Heaven mourns deeper. Noah reaches into a thought that can be it. Can it be that a history so sorrowful, so bleak and paining has found them both, and they both must weep harder over it than they have the rest?

But the Vault of Heaven's sobs to tug him back to the reality, shivering and stomach-knotting that something is very wrong, and the Vault's only sure answer to Noah's question is tears.

"What's wrong?" Noah asks, begging for specifics. "Why are you crying? Please, tell me—"

With how the Vault cries, Noah does not expect an answer.

But he receives one. In a voice without a sound, the Vault weeps:

I fear for you, sweet seedling. The cruelty of this world will seek you soon.

And I weep because I cannot save you from its evil.

Noah's brow furrows, his heart sinking as the tears continue to run.

Seek him? And it cannot save him? Did it mean he will be hurt?

Is he dying?

Noah trusts the Vault. He trusts it with his very life, but this seems too much. So left field. Death—Death is a concept Noah has not yet thought of the gravity of, and it drops on him now, heavy and real.

He trembles underneath it. Completely overcome.

Noah shakes the thoughts away and stammers, “What can I do? How can I save me?”

The Vault’s voiceless words carry a tone of mourning, *I do not know. I do not know...*

It does not know...? For all the history the Vault carries, it does not know his future beyond this bleak, heart-dropping prophecy?

Noah tries to pull more answers from the Vault, but it does not speak. Its breaths continue to rise and shudder like a crying person struggling to regain their composure. Unsettled, Noah opens his eyes and stands, wiping his face with the heels and backs of his hands. Something shimmers in his eye, and he glances down to see the glimmer of luminescent purples and blues flecked with white stars wetting his hands. His breath hitches in his chest. The tears...they sit like ink on his hands.

He does not know what to ask, what to say—*do*. He looks to the north, where the zenith surely rests on the azimuth’s path still, as the night has only begun. He presses his lips into a line, wringing his galaxy-stained hands. The Vault has been Noah’s home, his only refuge. The Quills have always preached that its walls are safe and its foundation sturdy—it is already well known. And yet to know that he is in danger, that his world may change, that a test of that safety may bring down this Vault he calls friend and the other Quill too, it puts a knot in his chest, a tense furrow in his brow, and the shaking airy chill of anxiety in his short soft form.

He must breathe deeply. He paces as he does, eyes shut to the world, only the stars of the Vault's breathing in his vision. If there is something he must do, *can* do, what is it?

What is it?

Is the answer patience? Fear? Or maybe...the answer can be to seek it out himself. He is no stranger to knowing things others do not or do not care to know.

Noah is one of many in the Vault who trains in and is trusted with the divining of time. These powers are only meant to reach into the past, to excavate from the cosmos the histories of the natural and the celestial that Candeo's primordial peoples have not recorded. He has only ever been trained to reach back, never forward. But his anxious mind, his increasing fear of the unknown, needs some respite. If his divination skill is meant to find history, to pull from the cosmos above, around, within the events that fill the blanks in their recordings, reaching into the future just a bit cannot be that much different. Though the idea that cruelty would find him soon sets panic deep into his bones, it gives him drive to go against what he knows and learn what horror awaits him.

He must try.

Noah sits in the center of the entryway's floor once more and wipes his eyes, starry tears still spilling down his cheeks and jaw. With his own deep breathing, he calms his jitters as best he can to reach inward. A pressure swells in his center and phantom dust brushes down his skin. A pulling sensation tugs

at his shoulders and he leans forward as a white glow lights his eyes behind his eyelids. A type of trance begins to circle him, his mind, the cue that it is safe to rejoin the predecessors of Candeo and commune with them. He opens his eyes, seeing deep blue space and constellations of their history. The entryway of the Vault of Heaven is gone, the floor replaced with swirling stars. And instead of laying back to sink into the star floor and dive to the past, Noah urges his astral form to stand from him. He crosses the floor, the stars rippling with each step. He presses on, seeking the future.

He is unsure how to do this, but he jumps in. He makes a path on his latest memory: the prophecy. It is much like pressing against a brick wall instead of opening a door. Black and blue auras wisp around him as he shoves against a solid surface just short of his present time. It ticks along, moving with time. He must push against it harder, maybe? He tries it. Noah pulls more power from within and presses more, and the wall is starting to budge. He just wants to see past it, just a bit. His breathing starts to race; shakily, he folds his hands together and tenses.

The wall is moving, he thinks. The horrible truth of his future is coming. He is scared. He continues to push. Something must give. And it will not be him. If he is in danger, he must know the truth—

As if the Vault senses the change in direction of Noah's divination, it shouts in his ears.

Noah, No!

He is just there, exactly right there. It will only take another second—
“Noah!” something shouts. It is a voice emerging sharply from the
pressuring silence. The wall before his eyes flashes bright and shoves him back,
and his astral form shoots back into his body. He cries out and falls, his head
hitting the tile of the Vault of Heaven’s floor.

His breathing is panicked as his eyes fly open.

He...he cannot see.

The painting on the ground floor’s ceiling does not appear to his eyes.
Instead, he sees flashes of images.

A surge of purple and gold light. Many maps with different divine
purposes. Deep tan skin, a haughty smile, and eyes of reds, oranges, and golds.
Sunsets. Then nothing but darkness, and a voice in his ear.

You want to get out of here, don't you?

NOAH

Noah can hear their whispers, and he tries to shut them out. Some of
them worry, some of them are appalled at his reckless dares. Quills have come
up to him, ones he has known as peer or caretaker, asking him when he plans to
give up this foolishness of saving his already protected life.

The Vault is impenetrable, they say.

The danger is all in his mind, they assure him.

But they did not hear what he heard that night. The Vault that is so protective, strong, and stable has told him a cruelty and an evil seek him out and it is something the Vault of Heaven, nor anyone he assumes can save him from. They have not felt for themselves the tears that the Vault cried that night and every night since. The sobs that pushed a frantic Noah to do what he had—and still has been doing.

He has not yet given up forcing his divination of time in the other direction toward the future as the degrees of day turn to the longer decans without rest—time has even changed houses twice. He keeps pushing his will against the wall blocking what horrors await him, of course the Quill society worries for him. Who would not hear of it? Sense it themselves? Feel the odd twist and off-roading of the cosmos in their home that corrupts the flow of time and shoves forward instead of floating back?

Noah will not blame them for being cautious, for side-eying him. What he has been doing is against their teachings, their very rules and lifestyle. As if to keep it more secret and out of the others' hair, Noah seeks the future when he knows the cosmic dating process is underway; when the Quills have gathered a team and set the Vault of Heaven to be busy divining backward, his small effort to reach forward goes unnoticed until he has been straining so long that he misses when cosmic dating ends and questions arise. It has happened more often than the once. Even so, Noah has the times memorized, as he has also been called to the task of reaching back to commune with the past and bring

history forward before. It is appalling that he is so strange, that his actions are concerning. It is a bit silly to his weary mind that no one has ever tried to turn chronomancy beyond a work of record keeping and into a magic of foresight. How many lives could be helped, *saved*, if the surety of chronomancy can be used for peering into the future in ways the divination of dreams, oneiromancy, cannot?

But that must be the weariness talking. It must be the growing isolation, self and societal as Noah loses tune with the other Quills and his duties and he becomes more concerned with this future of his to which he is damned. He has been losing his mind, and he is not necessarily focused on finding it as far as he and the other Quills are concerned, is he?

It has become a wild thought to ever stop looking for the truth to him. He may be a pariah, or on his way to be, but the other Quills, they who know him, teach him, or suspect him do not know the pain of their only loved one, the pain of his home and security, telling him that there is no way possible for him to save his own life from cruelty and evil soon approaching.

As if by a natural order of things, Noah finds himself in his room more often. If he is not in his room, he is tucked away in the most isolated corners of the Vault of Heaven to think and tug at his lips and sometimes weep. One reason is because he does not want the eyes of judgment on him, the second being he does not wish for anyone to see him, a once quiet, soft, yet social butterfly of a

soul like this. Pale, brittle, lacking sleep, full lips picked raw in some places, hands wringing to keep them from worsening the sting.

His only comfort is the night hour still. No, he has not given up his rituals—it is not the Vault's fault that something is coming for him, and he may not survive it—but the Vault has not spoken to him since that night and its harrowing prophecy. Its breaths still quiver whenever Noah joins it in the entryway, and Noah quivers, too. They are both scared for him, and that fact alone, that Noah does not have to fear for his safety alone, is a comfort in of itself, even if whenever he leaves his room to sit and breathe in the night hour, those words echo in his head in a steady repeating stream.

The cruelty of this world will seek you soon.

Noah has been tensing ever since, an icy bomb going off in his gut whenever he thinks on those words.

What does that mean? He wonders obsessively, What cruelty?

In his room, Noah has been digging through histories in no specific order to find at least some sort of hint. Some way to prepare himself for what is to come. Books and tomes of all shapes and size are stacked on his desk, bedside table, on the floor pushed against the starry walls that light his room in the day and keep it basking in warm light at night. He has gathered books on the horrors of Candeo, cycling out histories from different spheres of time—sifting through sets and sets of 360 years of information on monsters, demons, blights of cruel cosmos brought on by war, and natural obscenities each and all has been

enough to keep him up at night, fuel his nightmares, and set in him a sleep paralysis he has not yet felt before. Or at all. His night's rest has turned against him, pinning him to his bed by the chest and whispering his fears right back to him.

Certainly, he is absorbing plenty about the darkest acts, experiences, and creatures of this world, all that in surplus, but something is missing. He is sure of it. And in that missing part, the evil that is after him *must* lie.

He has refreshed his mind of the old and learned of new horrors, but none have any stories, accounts, or records of Quill deaths by others' hands? Not a damn one?

In a better mindset this information would soothe some part of Noah and allow him to think differently about the prophecy. The lack of Quill murders in the histories stored here must mean the Vault is *truly* safe.

He wishes so much that that is the case, because in his current state, knowing this has given him no rest. Knowing has only fueled the growing numbness and cold fear in his limbs from stress and worry. It is as if knowing is futile. As if Noah can assure himself of the Vault's protections as much as he likes and study the horrors of Candeo for degrees and degrees, but his swift, sudden death will come either way. It has been eating at him to be so well-read, so intelligent, so resourceful, but a single prophecy has brought into question all he knows, ripping his confidence in himself, his society, and his home to shreds.

How Quills—usually, typically, only—die is by natural cause. Their time runs out, their duty is complete when their last second ticks, and they become a part of the cosmos that keeps the Vault of Heaven safe. It is the ancestral Quills of the Vault that guard this place from facing any ill will, any evil. The Vault is not only Candeo's keeper, but the Quills' protector; it is so hard for Noah to swallow this prophecy that he will die by a cruel hand as a result. A Quill dying by murder? And after scouring the lengthiest of texts for such an event, it seems true that it has never happened to a Quill, either.

Noah curses his brain for keeping him so paranoid. There must be something in these libraries that will answer his question and assuage his worry. The Vault of Heaven has never failed to answer clearly. But it is so quiet on this; so quiet as if it is resigned to Noah's fate and has been mourning him ever since that prophecy.

There must be something.

Whenever Noah catches himself lain on a floor or on his bed, staring blankly at the piles and pillars of books or out the window to the Midheaven, the latter when Noah needs something that breathes to look to instead of the rigidity of books, bookcases, and night black walls, it is usually then that the vision that came after his first burrow into the future finds his stiff eyes.

The maps, the golds and purples, the haughty smile, those sunset eyes.

He wishes he had been smarter about that attempt, to at least remember the visuals more clearly. There must be something more, something clearer to

explain those visuals, but he gets no further. Each time he pushes into the future it ends in the same visual, the same pain, and each time it leaves him crying stars and galactic waters, his eyes blinded for a time.

After or during this added aspect to his rituals, Noah is always caught by the same Quill who stopped him that first night from digging too far in the future. Xe is his friend, but xe worries too much.

In other words, Tabitha has been keeping xir eye on him, and while Noah has a challenging time finding a moment where he has, in the past, found xir presence insufferable, he does now, especially those times he needs to push against the wall his teachings have erected to prevent him from knowing before it is time to know. He wishes xe'd leave him be for his peace; the moment he begins breathing and synchronizing with the cosmos to stand at the future's gate is the only peace and rest he gets nowadays. Agitation when it is disturbed and shaken is a given.

This time, though, Tabitha has found Noah before he has even had a chance to attempt abusing his chronomancy today.

Noah is returning his horde of books to their proper shelves when Tabitha trots up to his side, xir afro of spun gold hair that crowns their brown and pale pink vitiligo skin bouncing with each energetic step to join him. Noah sees xem coming from the corner of his eye. Xir white and purple gradient robes are hard to miss, and so is xir hair that catches any light and magnifies it, as if it is a cosmic body itself. It might be just how slow-moving Noah is nowadays, but

Tabitha seems to come upon him quicker now than all other times, as if she is trying to corner Noah before he has a chance to run or elude her. Noah makes the mistake of looking at her and her pale gold eyes, large and round under the furrow of her eyebrows. The mistake of seeing the tip of their round broad nose touched to their pouty lips.

“I already know what you’re going to say,” Noah murmurs; even his voice is worn, and his throat is angry with her for speaking.

“Noah, you look horrible,” are the first words from Tabitha’s mouth.

Noah’s shame in himself at the comment and its truth could be more prevalent. He knows how he looks; he avoids mirrors not wishing to see how purple his under eyes are, how frizzy his dreadlocks are from his constant pulling to soothe himself and his missed palm rolling, how dry his own brown skin is and how chapped his lips are. His gentle movements are replaced with stiff sluggish ones. He may feel shame about this at some point, yet tiredness and numbness have yet to leave him be any time soon. So, put off are his concerns to care about his appearance as he once had.

“At least let me do your hair,” Tabitha supplies. “Just like always.” Noah does not answer. “Noah, let me help.”

Noah sighs deeply, eyelids heavy, and tilts his head back to find patterns in the starry ceiling. He is not sure if he even needs help. Or wants it. But he is poked in the side by a sharp fingernail, right in his ribs and he hisses, batting Tabitha’s hand away and turning to look at her again. As exhausted and testy as

he is, he cannot be angry with xem when xir brow is tight with such worry and xir eyes scan his face for signs of sickness and keep finding things to worry over.

Noah remembers waking in his bed with Tabitha sitting beside him the morning after this obsession of his began, a compress to his head and xir eyes as rife with worry as they are now.

Xe had begged him then what xe begs him now in silence, “Don’t do that again. Please Noah, don’t do that again.”

Noah did not listen. He is determined to a fault, and that fault is now affecting him visibly after degrees spent stressing, day hour to night hour, over this prophecy.

Noah realizes Tabitha is waiting for him to answer xem, but he does not know what to say that they both already do not know about his current condition.

Tabitha speaks again instead, not waiting for him any longer. “You’re going to fulfill that prophecy yourself if you keep this up,” xe says, “fear’s cruelty is eating you alive.”

Noah sighs, sets the book in his hands, only slightly worn around the edges but still freshly bound, back in its place. His fingers linger on the material as his other hand raises up and rubs his temples.

“You think I haven’t thought of that as the answer already?” he asks. “I know what I’m doing is dangerous, I know the fear of death can be what’s killing me, yet I can’t stop looking.” It is his turn to look Tabitha in the eyes with a worried brow, with an additional dismayed expression and pain. There is a wild,

morbid curiosity in his eyes that has only gained intensity with each failure and attempt, he knows it, and is assured of it when Tabitha reaches up to cup his face. “It can’t be fear that the Vault spoke of. That doesn’t feel right. True. It has to be something else—”

A suggestion Tabitha has yet to let die bursts from his lips again, “Why don’t you just ask an elder for help, an interpretation—”

“They’ll wipe my memory,” he says, again, as his answer to her has not changed since the last time she suggested it. “The elders are already watching me because of rumors that I’m breaking rules.”

The elders, as far as Noah are concerned, can stay in the dark—or mostly the dark—about his exploits. They are always available for the younger Quills’ needs, open to assist with their studies, their training, their uncertainty of their dreams. The elder Quills are a source of comfort and advice when the histories and records that the younger Quills retrieve daily trouble them. Noah informing the elders that he is afraid of his death, as other Quills might be due to what they have seen of the *past*, that would be something Noah is more willing to seek their insight on. Their claims that he is safe here, that no Quill has ever died horrifically, would be helpful to Noah’s fears.

But dying in the future? Dying by a cruel hand? An unstoppable evil?

Who has answers for that? Who can soothe such fear but the truth?

Wiping his mind so that he forgets he is afraid and in danger sounds, to Noah, an even greater fear than the fear of death itself.

He shakes his head, pushes a hand over his frizzy dreadlocks, “I don’t want my assailant—or whatever the Vault means by cruelty and evil—to surprise me. I need to know what it is. What my gut says it is.”

“But why?” Tabitha presses. “The truth is none of that can enter here. No danger can find you in these walls. The Vault of Heaven is the safest place in Candeo, ever.”

And that’s what concerns me, Noah thinks. I am a ship docked and tethered.

If something dangerous is coming for him, coming to kill him, he is right where they or it expects him to be. They can find him in an instant. He will die before he has even had a chance to truly fight to live. What a sad fate, for his only chance at survival being reading up on the many ways people have died in Candeo. At least right now, that is the truth.

Noah reaches back to gather his hair and pull his dreadlocks over his shoulder one more time, tugging at the braids so the thick coils at the ends spring back as a distraction. Part of one he pulls comes off, the remainder like a frayed candle, and it sinks his heart. This hunt of his is messing with his most comforting process about his health, tending to his dreadlocks. Tabitha must see the pain in his face, for she takes the broken hair from him and tucks it in her pocket. Noah murmurs a thank you and hides the broken dreadlock among the healthy ones.

“The more I look Tabitha, the more I can’t trust these walls,” Noah says. He looks to xem again; he pushes down the guilt at the slight horror that crosses xir face. He speaks softly, “I feel like I’ve been taught lies.”

“If you can’t trust your home, who can you trust?” Tabitha asks, leaning xirself against the bookcase. Xe’s no doubt tired too of Noah’s stressful endeavors; if xe leans against the bookcase to support xirself, Noah does not blame xem. Noah looks past xem to see other Quills meandering about, reading, stocking shelves, sitting at the round tables, editing. He drops his gaze back to Tabitha.

“I trust the truth,” Noah says. He does not intend to be vague, but that is all his weary brain has as an explanation.

“The truth isn’t here,” Tabitha says. Xir worry carries an exasperation, especially now that they both know Noah’s hair is affected. “And even if the truth was elsewhere...Quills can’t leave the tower. There’s no way for you to know it.”

“That’s one truth...I’m not so sure about,” Noah says. Tabitha looks as if xe needs an answer to that statement, but Noah does not have one. He stresses over it himself. Why does he keep searching even when no answers come to him? What happens when he runs out of books? When all ways to find the answers are gone?

There is no way else besides trying to break that wall to the future, and that has taken more of a toll on Noah than obsessive study. The thought of escaping is somehow even more tasking than that to consider; once claimed,

raised, and taught as a Quill, there is no escape. Proof of that is Noah has never thought of it until now, and that scares him. Even if a Quill does, by some rare chance manage to leave, there is no chance of them surviving on the outside; Noah has read the horrors of Candeo. There's evidence that even the peoples outside the Vault of Heaven cannot survive it. And a Quill thinking of the outside? A person who all they know is the Vault and its many floors? There is no way the outside terrain, weather, and vast unknown will ever be absorbed by a Quill in an effortless way. They can read all they like; it is a separation, of a kind. But to be out in that world, the true bright world, Candeo? Unheard of. Noah has been warned that it is but a death sentence.

And yet...Noah still questions it.

He has been questioning many things, not just what deadly future awaits him.

Noah cannot deny that challenging what he knows has been giving him a bit of a thrill. A liveliness that has such a hold on him that part of him wonders if he is seeking the answer to his prophecy for his own peace, or if he is enjoying the disappointment of getting no closer to the truth because the drive to continue makes him want the truth more.

He has not admitted this to Tabitha; he'd drag him to an elder himself and the next thing Noah will know is that he is comatose in the healing ward unsure of his own name. Whenever he comes back from a bout with the future's wall, there is an adrenaline in him and his shaky breaths that, while terrifying, is

addictingly so. It truly is driving him crazy, this hunt for knowledge; he has become abnormal, and that is why the Vault of Heaven's society whispers.

But the hunt for the truth to something so critical as his own death and the fear, frustration, and mystery that comes with it makes him feel differently about his life here, about the life the Quills raise him to be okay with. It makes him wonder if he has ever truly felt content. Content that he is satisfied with just witnessing the sea instead of being in it, content to watch the sky as the zenith star and the azimuth turn from morning to night instead of being underneath it, content to imagine the temperatures change as the histories have told instead of being out there, to feel it. The wind. The heat of the zenith star. The cool of the azimuth. He wonders if, in his adult years, especially now that fear is haunting his steps, that he has been truly satisfied that the only bit of the natural and the cosmic he needs experience are those moments on the ground floor of the Vault, where he sits, ironically enough on top of the enchanted place that lets people from the outside come and go.

You want to get out of here, don't you?

Tapping his forehead against a shelf, the rounded edge supporting his head's weight, Noah realizes he has not yet considered the answer to that specific question. Through all his hunting, diving, sleepless nights, and fearing, that might be the most important question of all.

Is there any reason not to consider it now? What can he lose, wondering if braving the outside was a better fate than holing up and worrying himself to

madness on the in? After days—decans, houses of searching for every plausible form of death the histories tell could be his, he finally considers that question.

You want to get out of here, don't you?

A shudder runs through Noah, but not from cold, or fear. It might be that tempter, adrenaline, the one that spikes when he is afraid but eager.

Tabitha is here still. He must tell xir, right?

He parts his lips to speak then something changes in the air. Something shifts in the encompassing aura around Noah that keeps him from speaking. It is not unusual; it is a common feeling Noah and Tabitha and other Quill like them and before them have felt. It is like a pressure in Noah's chest. It is a similar jolt one feels when hearing a surprising sound. Due to their training as Quill, it is a subconscious reaction to feel the cosmos's pull as it concentrates in the entryway on the Vault's ground floor, at the star map that decorates the deep blue tile in rose gold swirls and angles.

Someone has come.

Not just anyone, Noah thinks on impulse. There is something about the shift in cosmos this time that compels him to see who has come in the Vault of Heaven's impenetrable walls. The sunset eyes he sees whenever he breaks free of divining the future flash before his mind.

The cruelty of this world will seek you soon.

You want to get out of here, don't you?

I cannot protect you from its evil.

You want to—

Noah leaves his books, trotting off to the teleport map on this floor. These maps are the only way to travel the numerous levels in the Vault of Heaven and not take decans to find your desired place. Tabitha calls out to him. It sounds too as though he follows close behind him, but Noah keeps walking briskly to make it to the ground floor before whomever has shown up has been engaged, chatted with, and guided to what they seek. He feels a deep urge to be the one who guides this visitor, to speak with them.

As he hops onto the map and begins the swift process of synchronizing his inner cosmos to it, divining the mythic path from here to the ground floor, Tabitha grabs his sleeve and syncs herself too, coming along for Noah's impulsive ride to the ground floor. As they go, what comes to Noah's mind is that vision.

Purple and gold.

Maps of divine make.

A haughty smile.

And eyes like the sunset.

ALLELUIA

Alleluia Noceur of the Orlaith has sailed the islands of Serendipity, Candeo's Treasurer, where the gems that make up the stars used for trade reside, their beds cradled in bioluminescent stone only the most skilled of geomancers can mine. He has scaled the Luminaries in Namika, Candeo's

Trident, mountains that kiss the auroras. There he has uncovered the Stardust Caverns, those caves of old secluded and secretive that hold primordial scripture of the first worshipers of the cosmos. He has encountered many charybdi in the Shield Country Kairos's whirlpools and won, he has traveled the great plains of the Sickle Country Cystenina on dragon hound back. He has taken part in the Dies Irae, the Days of Wrath in the Country of Kings, Adira and its Coliseum, the Great Void.

And yet somehow this is his first time visiting the center of the world, the island that sits amid the Midheaven waters. Those waters are interesting to traverse; it put his crew on their toes for sure, following the strict instructions the histories, the ones shared with the world outside the Vault, tell. He feels so in the sky but on the ground at the same time, floating without rising. Now he feels part of something much greater than himself, greater than the world.

He has heard much about the Vault of Heaven. At the same time, he has heard not much at all. He knows the society within are called the Quills, a people who come in as children when memories are a new concept and never leave. They receive a calling of sorts from something within the tower, elders come for them, and once they make it here, they have come "home." They are then trained in chronomancy, the divination of time, and they draft books until they become the history they write about. And that is it about the Quills.

About the place in general, the Vault of Heaven keeps the world's history in its rawest form. All of it, every second of time, every hour, every degree. As

well, this is the only place in Candeo that anyone can get a true map. The world has misused them, is the rumor. History must be curated to keep the same mistakes from happening again, and some aspects of history must be held back from the world entirely.

That is the kind of rumor Alleluia likes. The kind of musts that spark his adventuring eye.

So here Alleluia stands at the base of the grand tree of stone, magic, and time, Candeo's Keeper, the Vault of Heaven. It is wide like a city, "roots" winding like those of an old tree that has existed before time. He stands firmly on the ground, his gaze cast up the mighty trunk that continues into the swirling bodies of space and stars that form the tree's canopy, or at least what he can see of it without falling over. The Vault of Heaven seems to thrust up into the atmosphere and into space; a spire piercing past the clouds, into nothing.

The cosmos is different here; it is the first thing he has noticed. It feels like a brush on the skin yet a weight on the shoulders. A pressure, yet a lightness. Something that, to Alleluia, feels like it acknowledges his presence. Looking around, there are small lights no bigger than a fingernail floating about on the breeze, lighting the darkening pink and purple sky like strokes of a paintbrush. The walkway, a massive and broad tree root, the wood a brown one would expect of a tree, is alight with the same starlight, except it strictly follows the path up to the grand doors of the Vault of Heaven.

“Pretty welcoming for a place that doesn’t want you to remember the way up,” Alleluia says, a smirk coiling his full lips.

He speaks to the two flanking his left and right sides: a broad-shouldered woman with medium brown skin on the left and a taller, deep brown man on his right with many short, honey-colored braids adorned with gold clips framing his face.

The woman, Chevelure, flips her thick silver hair over her shoulder; it cascades down her back like a waterfall, sheet straight and cut asymmetrically with the right side longer than the left at a steep angle. It is held out of her face by a dark blue bandana tied around her head like a cap.

“Maybe we’re reading it wrong,” she offers, “it could be a warning sign.”

“I don’t necessarily like being wrong,” Alleluia says, his tone only playfully serious, “so I’m right until further notice.”

“Or you’re getting old,” Zavian, the man to Alleluia’s right says, taking initiative with his long legs and long sleeves clinking like metal on metal—absolutely the knives hidden among the clothes—striking the first steps up the path. Alleluia and Chevelure fall in line with him, catching up easily.

A put-upon sigh gusts from Alleluia’s mouth. “If I didn’t like you, I’d use all your knives to gut you for that one,” he says, and Zavian cackles in response.

Alleluia is far from old; he has just hit his early thirties, a ripe thirty-two. He is confident in his age and ability, make no mistake. He has been crafting, curating, leaping into his life as an explorer and a hunter of truth since he was

fifteen, before he could even think of growing the majestic beard he has now. Zavian in all their infinite irritation, just loves picking at his age even though Zavian is only a few years Alleluia's junior. "Grandad" has yet to leave Zavian's vocabulary when referring to Alleluia. And Chevelure, as usual, chooses to stay out of it.

The path up is much longer than it seems; after a few minutes walking, the door has hardly grown closer. It is curious to Alleluia, not yet concerning. Alleluia knows they are moving forward; the path is inclined, even if it is slightly. What comes to stand out to him is what is happening behind.

Something is pushing him, as if urging him forward by a tugging hand and arm. He glances to Chevelure, who has tensed up, her hackles risen; she hates things at her back that she has no control over, so it is clear to him that she feels it, too. He pats her on the back of the arm to keep walking.

"Easy, Chevy," he says. "I feel it, too."

Chevelure visibly relaxes just a smidge, but Alleluia does not miss how she folds her arms over her chest, leans more forward, and murmurs to pick up the pace.

As far as Alleluia can tell, as he is the most arcane, the most skilled diviner among them all, this pressure has no intention of hurting them. He chances a look behind Chevelure to see what is pushing against them. Usually, he can see the raw cosmos as clear as leaves on a tree if he opens his eyes to it

with a little help from his own cosmic connection, but now he cannot turn his head. He can only see as far as the side of Chevelure's face.

He turns the other way to look at Zavian, who, if the pressure that is pushing them on bothers him, it is missing on his face, which usually means something *is* picking at the strings of his nerves. Alleluia cannot see as far as the side of Zavian's face, either. The peripheral of his vision also cuts off at that point; nothing but black there. There is a power at work here, strange, and unusual. Odd. Unsettling.

It seems the powers that rule the Vault do not want them remembering the path back down, either. It does not want them to turn around. Alleluia's had yet to visit a place or cave or mysterious wonder that wanted him inside. So, Alleluia decides to play along; he faces forward once more, looking onward toward the doors that become clearer and more ornate in their decoration the closer the three of them get.

Alleluia blinks and they are suddenly at the doors. He and the others frown at the deep blue wood with gold marbling through it like veins. He opts to wave off his own worry as he observes it, seeing black metal accenting the hinges, the frame, and the inside where the two doors meet.

"Pretty," Chevelure hums. "Strange, but pretty."

Alleluia agrees with a hum of his own. Something tells him to place a hand on both doors and push. Without much of a thought, since he feels no danger, Alleluia does.

The gold in the doors glitter and both doors swing open without a sound. Nothing but pastel clouds meet their eyes as the dark blue doors disappear inside. The pressure at their backs pushes them more insistently, and Alleluia leads the way into the smoke and cloud.

He has learned not to fear what he cannot see. Whatever may come, may come. And no matter what comes, Alleluia is going to win, every time. His pride commands it.

His boot hits tile after that first step, and Chevelure and Zavian both audibly release the tension in their bodies as the two of them stumble forward. When Alleluia blinks next, there are no more pastel clouds before his eyes. There's a round entryway and further ahead is an open, gothic arc leading into a dense library where the books float off the shelves and warm light shines down from above. There is a star map, no doubt for travel out of this place at their feet, its rose gold glyphs speaking of paths down and memories stored. Erased.

Alleluia, Chevelure, and Zavian are surrounded by more decorative doors, smaller versions of the two they all just stepped through, equal steps apart. There is a painting on the roof, detailed in its make, telling a story—no, a history, which must be of immense importance to be the first impression of the Vault of Heaven. He gazes up at it, entranced.

There are storms at one end, a wave of people led by a woman figure in white into a more stable world. Then there is a mass of purple and blue and green spiraling toward the center of the ceiling.

“Well. That looks expensive,” Zavian murmurs. Alleluia puffs out his nose, and he grins just slightly.

“It seems we’ve made it inside,” he says. “What’s this on the roof?”

A soft, musical voice calls out to them, “It’s the origins of the Vault!” it says.

Alleluia lowers his eyes back to the world below the art. A youth with red and black dreadlocks and brown skin trots over to them, their silver and blue robes hanging loosely about their frame. Their tired eyes are yet bright and curious, the irises the most engaging purple Alleluia has ever seen. He has never seen such a shade like that before. Their freckled face smiles at him, beaming white teeth with a small gap between the front top two revealed.

“It seems proper that the first history people see in the Vault is its own, no?” the person says. “It’s not complete, but it’s still pretty.”

“Indeed,” Alleluia says, amusement plain on his face.

Following behind them is another robed person, their round brown and pink face haloed with an afro of gold curls. They have a more elegant trot to their step; a casual glide with no rush, but pale gold eyes scanning and calculative.

“Ah, I should introduce myself—You call me Noah—May. Call me Noah,” the purple-eyed one bows quickly, “he/him pronouns, please.” He blushes as he tucks his hair back behind his ears. “E-Excuse my hair; I missed my wash day and palm rolling, but I promise I’m capable and ready to help as your Quill of the day. Whatever you need.”

The other Quill places their hand on Noah's arm with a light squeeze. Noah nods and takes a deep breath as the second Quill speaks. "You may call me Tabitha," they say evenly. "xe/xir/xem pronouns, thank you."

Greetings are universal, Alleluia thinks, which, good, that customs stretch even to a place so isolated as the Vault of Heaven. He has never seen a Quill before, never heard of what they look like, how they move. He feels at ease that they are not so different from the people outside where looks are concerned. There is a certain serenity to Tabitha and a jittery curiosity to Noah he finds, hmm, endearing. Either way, they are his help today, and he needs to be polite. He dons his most charming smile.

"Well met, Noah, Tabitha." He nods to them both, and they nod in return. Chevelure and Zavian speak their greetings as well.

Alleluia goes to speak again, yet he pauses. Noah's purple eyes meet his in an instant as soon as he turns to look at their Quill guides. It is then that he realizes Noah's gaze has not ever left him. The way he beholds Alleluia borders on unnatural. The gaze scans, dissects, is in awe, a bit wild, fearful, nervous. But Alleluia supposes he would also, at least in some part, find visitors from the outside world, people different from everything he has ever known curious to the point of staring with intent to memorize.

Though there is something else about Noah's eyes. Something Alleluia has yet to place.

He internally shakes it off, remembering himself, his manners. "I am Alleluia, he/him," he says. He wears a confident yet casual grin. "A pleasure."

"Chevelure, she/her."

"Call me Zavian, by he/him or they/them, no preference."

Alleluia watches as Noah mouths their names as they say them, nodding sharply when he has their pronouns, while Tabitha merely tips xir head up in acknowledgement just the once. A pair cannot be so different from each other than these two, can there?

"Welcome to the Vault, Alleluia, Chevelure, Zavian," Noah says, looking to each. He claps his hands together, raising his fingers to his lips. His brown hands are stained with purple and blue and reds, flecks of white...inks? Tattoos?

"How can we assist you?" Tabitha says. "What do you seek from the Quills?"

"Ah! Yes," Noah chimes in. "What does this group seek indeed?"

"I'm looking for a map of Candeo," Alleluia says. He looks between Noah and Tabitha, his eyes landing on Noah's, looking into that set of vibrant purple eyes a hue he has never seen before. "The most complete one you can manifest, even if it is from apocrypha."

As is characteristic of him through and through, Alleluia has a mission. His greatest hunt. As well traveled, as daring, as adventurous as a man as Alleluia is, word travels with him. Word finds him. He has heard the apocryphal tales that have traveled from oral tradition to oral tradition, dialect to dialect. The stories

grandmothers croon at bedtime. The boastings sailors without their first sunburns yet shout to the rooftops that they have found before anyone else. The escapes that fairy tales and books imagine, and Alleluia is the one foolish enough to believe there is a kernel of truth to them. Each time he hears them his knowledge of what wonders make up these stories grows; however, to his recollection, and he remembers much, no one has dared find out if those tales were truth. If they had value.

To have a full map of Candeo, a map with nothing to hide even if it tells lies, is what Alleluia seeks. What the tales say, what the Secrets of Candeo say, will be proven true. Alleluia swears his pride, his entire career as an explorer where no danger, no matter how great, how looming is deadly upon it.

His declaration seems to have startled the Quills. Tabitha shows it most.

“A map? Including apocrypha? As in places?” he questions. There is a hint of hesitance in his voice; Alleluia can see it in his face as well. Does he know something?

“The Vault of Heaven is the only place anyone can get a map to anywhere of any place, correct?” Zavian asks. When Alleluia looks to them, Zavian tilts their head to the side, gold adornments clinking as their braids move. Alleluia can hear the smile in his voice; he is trying to coerce a Quill, something even Alleluia is not sure is possible. They have never spoken with one before. “There has to be maps that include that of the fairy tales?”

“The Vault provides *legitimate* maps,” Tabitha corrects. “Fairy tale maps are typically drawn in books. From the imaginations of their authors. Outside the Vault of Heaven.”

“I shall rephrase, then. There must be a *legitimate* map that those fairy tale maps are based on,” Zavian says. “Is there not?”

The look on Tabitha’s face crosses into annoyance for just a moment before sliding back into its cool elegance and a lifted chin. Xe must be a younger Quill, as must be Noah, who has yet to stop studying Alleluia’s face. Alleluia cannot say he minds it; he knows he is handsome. His cheekbones are sharp, his beard a deep brown and well-trimmed, his hair a mane thick and dark and coiling smelling of intoxicating oils and finery. He is broad, full, and sculpted in the most favorable of places. He will not lie, it is going to his head a bit, as it always does when someone is suddenly beholding him like a wonder of the world himself.

It almost startles them all when Noah speaks. “S-Sorry to be so bold, but—Alleluia? Your eyes,” he says, stepping forward into Alleluia’s space. Amidst all the tiredness and pinning curiosity of Noah’s gaze, there is a roundness, a softness, a quiet excitement in his eyes framed with long lashes.

Alleluia raises an eyebrow. “My eyes?” he repeats.

“Yes,” Noah says, standing before him fully, eyes locked with his. “They’re like sunsets.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he catches Tabitha jump. Oh? Alleluia looks to xem, seeing uncertainty and pause cross xir face; the clearest emotion since they began this exchange.

“Yes, yes they are,” Alleluia says. Or so he is told. Depending on the day, they shift from ambers to golds, reds to yellows, with his pupils taking a bluish, purplish hue, no matter the hour. When he looks at his eyes in a mirror, yes, he can agree that they look like sunsets.

This excites Noah, excites him even more than he has been before.

“And you wear golds—” Noah points out, waving at Alleluia’s neck, cupping his own.

Alleluia does wear gold—his choker is gold with a turquoise orb dangling from it on a single chain link.

“And purples—”

Alleluia’s robes at current were a royal purple, though the color was desaturated compared to Noah’s eyes. And right now, those eyes were glimmering, sparkling, brighter than any stone or star.

It takes a moment for Alleluia to realize that what twinkles Noah’s eyes are tears.

“Golds, purples, looking for maps,” Noah ticks these off on his fingers, his grin wide, “a haughty smile—”

This...has caught Alleluia off guard. It is so sudden, and all eyes in this moment are watching him. He does not mind center stage, he prefers it, but this...this is different.

This is a person who, if Alleluia's hunch is correct, is claiming to know him from somewhere. A person who has seen nothing outside the pages of books, these walls, and the Midheaven waters, Alleluia knows for certain.

He interjects into Noah's babbling anyway, awkwardly, "I wouldn't call it *haughty*—"

"No, it is," Noah says, nodding quickly. "And your eyes." Noah touches Alleluia's face, soft but holding. Alleluia would flinch away, but he cannot move. "Eyes like sunsets."

Alleluia wants to blink, to turn away, but he is compelled to keep Noah's gaze.

"You," Noah says. He presses his hands into Alleluia's face, his grin bubbling up. "You, I've been waiting for you!"

"Waiting?" Chevelure says.

"For him?" Zavian adds.

"Noah, wait—" Tabitha reaches out for him, but Noah brushes her off.

"I've been waiting," Noah says. "I've been *looking* for you."

For the first time in a long time, Alleluia does not know what to say. He balks.

“You,” Noah says. Both hands raising up to softly rest on Alleluia’s cheeks. “You’re who I saw in the future!” Noah hops in place. He laughs. “It’s you, Alleluia...”

“Me?” Alleluia finally says, softly.

“Yes...” Noah blinks away the tears, a genuine happiness bursting forth. “I’ve been looking for you.”

Noah hugs Alleluia around his shoulders, so much relief in his tone.

“It’s you...you’re the one,” Noah laughs a sob. Happy, a bit sad, right in Alleluia’s ear. “You’re the cruelty of this world that’s going to kill me.”

ALLELUIA

Something unfamiliar to Alleluia sits heavy in his gut as shock writes itself across his every facial feature.

It is fear.

He is meant to...

...be the *death* of someone?

“Wait, hold—” Zavian stammers, moving to get in between Alleluia and Noah, “hold on, what did you say? *Kill?*”

Say something, Alleluia barks at himself. Say something, you fool.

Instead, Alleluia looks at Tabitha, whose stricken face is what his horror needs to look like, if he was not fighting so hard to keep composure. This. This is not what he has come to the Vault for.

He shakes out of the stun by shaking his head, getting his own arms between himself and Noah and pushing this strange Quill back from him. And there they are, those damn eyes—Alleluia looks down. Away.

“No,” Alleluia says, closing his eyes, “No, no, no, Noah, I am *no one’s* death.”

While Alleluia is no stranger to battle, no stranger to fighting for his life and coming out the one still living, that is not every case. Especially not here.

“But Alleluia,” Noah says. “You check all the boxes—”

Of what, a *murderer*? Alleluia is accustomed to checking people’s boxes, but not that of a *murderer*—

In such a revered place? The Vault of Heaven?

That is a death sentence, and not one Alleluia seeks willingly. It is the antithesis of what he plans to do. Of what he is even looking for.

Coming here just to kill someone? A single Quill?

For what?

Influence?

No—

“You have me mistaken for someone—*something* else,” Alleluia says. He finds the strength to look Noah in the eyes again, but there is no fear there.

Alleluia’s not sure *what is* exactly in Noah’s expression right now, but he knows for certain it is not surprise, which just unnerves Alleluia further. He stumbles on

what to say; it is more of a struggle than he would like to admit, keeping the unsurety out of his voice. He shakes his head again.

“I’m not here to kill anyone, at all.” Alleluia pushes Noah further away. The Quill moves easily, thankfully, as Alleluia holds him at arm’s length and eventually backs up a step himself, holding up his hands, washing himself clean of any such prophecy.

In a different circumstance, maybe outside here, such an accusation has enough gall to spark rage in Alleluia, maybe at least an arrogant laugh. But this Quill is small, soft, *frail*. Alleluia has no ill will toward this being! He is reeling with confusion more than anything the longer he wrestles with this. Stands with this, stark still.

Looking at Noah now, if he is any bit phased by his own words, he is not showing it. It is not like Zavian, where even his hiding is readable. Noah is new and strange and a bit frightening—he does not look ashamed, or even embarrassed that he might be wrong—that he *is* wrong. He still holds that same, dreamy relief.

You are the cruelty of this world that is going to kill me.

Why does he seem so confident of that?

Why does he look so relieved?

Chevelure cuts the tension with her voice, husky and sharp. “Let’s just calm down,” she says. Alleluia ducks his head and looks away, taking this

chance to regain himself. “Is there somewhere we can go? Somewhere not so...out in the open?”

That is right; they are barely in the entryway, and it is already going un-according to plan. Alleluia checks their surroundings. While there is no one else here, thank the seas, it gets Alleluia hot and disgruntled to be taken by surprise like this.

He adjusts his robes, calming himself down when he just catches Tabitha murmuring something about one of the rooms nearby. He looks up, expecting Noah to be staring at him. He is half right; Noah has looked his way, but Tabitha has taken him by the hand, getting his attention. Xe pulls him off to the room closest to them, and Chevelure is right behind xem.

Alleluia sighs, muttering to himself to get his shit together, and he follows the path Tabitha has set, Zavian alongside him. They put a hand on his shoulder and squeeze, but Alleluia waves him off. Of course, this has shaken him, but he is not out done. Not breaking.

No matter what comes, he will win. That is fact.

When they all file into the room, Alleluia takes a chance to observe where they are to mask his discomfort. The ceiling is high, just like the entryway, but instead of a grand masterpiece of the Vault’s history, it is simply a night sky with constellations. Floating orb sconces light the room with a wave of Tabitha’s hand. There are seats in this room, a table, all a dark wood with gold accents. At least the Vault is fashionable with its strange residents.

Alleluia has a seat while Chevelure shuts the door. Alleluia does not trust himself to speak quite yet—he is not one to keep making a fool of himself when he needs to calculate—so he gestures for Zavian to fill his space. With a nod, his companion does move into that role. In circumstances outside now as well, Zavian retrieves information as his principal duty to Alleluia’s campaigns.

“So, Noah, yes?” Zavian says, stepping closer to the Quill who is no longer fidgeting, no longer a bundle of jitters. It might have something to do with Tabitha having settled him in a seat, a hand of xirs keeping him still. Noah’s eyes slide from Alleluia to Zavian.

“Yes,” he says. “Zavian?”

“Correct,” Zavian says. He claims the seat close by Noah, nodding at Tabitha, who still has xir hand on Noah’s shoulder. “You say there’s a prophecy.”

“Yes,” Noah says.

Zavian nods. “Right. And this prophecy says, what, that Alleluia is come to kill you?”

“Well, no,” Noah rubs his hands, “it says that the cruelty of the world will seek me out soon. And the Vault won’t be able to protect me from its evil.”

Alleluia furrows his brow. His looks? Devilish, but he is far from *evil*.

Zavian takes in what is said in that slow nod of his. “We’re not here to harm anyone, is the thing, Noah. We are just here for a map. We can’t be who your prophecy speaks of.”

“But the map, it’s a part of the prophecy,” Noah says. “In the vision that follows it. The Vault itself gave it to me.”

Noah sounds so sure. Alleluia might be impressed at some other time when it is not his ego on the line. But Noah’s face falls and he casts his eyes to his lap, where he fiddles with his stained hands and his robes.

“It’s been decans, I’ve been looking,” Noah says. “Scouring all of the histories about the darkest things, about monsters, about the kinds of death people experience. Murders. The other Quills have not approved of this—they have seen what it has been doing to me, what I have been doing because of it, but I just. I need to know. I even tried to turn chronomancy forward, toward the future—”

“You can do that?” Zavian asks, incredulous. Alleluia’s own eyebrows raise; that is the first Alleluia’s heard of such use. Chronomancy is only for the past, is what he recalls of it from what little there is about the Quill society outside these walls.

Noah leans his head side to side, musing. “Well, no, not completely. I get small visions whenever I try, so I consider that a win.” Noah rubs his chin, looking away from them. “And each time it has been of you, Alleluia. Aspects.” Noah glances up into Alleluia’s eyes. Where Alleluia remembers being captive to Noah’s eyes just moments ago, now Alleluia’s stomach twists. This disturbance is too fresh. “Your eyes, your smile. Your colors. And the maps you’re looking for.”

Zavian turns in his seat to look back to Alleluia. His look says, *are you sure this quest of ours is worth it?*

Alleluia takes a moment to wonder that himself. Is his desire to find the Secrets of Candeo worth all this?

Of damn course it is.

Alleluia sighs and sits upright, folding his hands in his lap and landing his gaze on Noah. They will be able to leave once they get what they need, and Noah—and Tabitha as well—knows where it is. Alleluia has been in this business too long. He has not and just will not be scared off by some prophecy. Some odd vision that follows. His goals are far greater than the ravings of a small Quill who, by some strange machinations—who thinks this tower speaks, even—believes he is going to be taken out of this world by Alleluia’s hand.

Alleluia takes the reins. He is back in the seat. “Right. Let us change course. Noah, regardless of who you *think* I am,” Alleluia says, keeping his tone measured, even. “You seem to know what I’m here for.”

Tabitha opens xir mouth to cut in, to protest, deny Alleluia, tell them all to go, but Noah holds up his hand, whispering a quiet word to get Tabitha to step back. Xe folds xir arms, discomfort furrowing xir brow.

Alleluia fills the space, taking that as a cue to continue, “you say there were maps in your prophecy. The vision parts. Do you know where they are? Are they here?”

“Well, they must be,” Noah says. He stands, once again rubbing his chin as he begins to pace. Away from the three of them, thankfully, but he paces, both hands finding his cheeks, tucking his dreadlocks behind his ears, then cupping the sides of his neck. “This is the only place in Candeo to get maps. And you are looking for maps that we do not make. We don’t give maps that speak of apocrypha, though I question that.”

“Noah,” Tabitha hisses as xe watches on, looking between Noah and Alleluia. There is a fear in xir face that Alleluia notices now. Xe truly does appear as if xe knows something that not even Noah knows. Alleluia has never so much wanted to pick someone’s brain apart, but he waits. Noah is who he wants answers from at current.

“So Zavian’s right,” Alleluia says, nodding to his companion who has regained his own stability and turned to face the Quills, “there are maps that lead to the apocrypha of Candeo.”

“Hypothetically,” Noah corrects, holding up a finger, though it does not move from his neck. He does not face them, either. “We can check the Roots, not usually where maps are made, but we’ll have to work quickly.”

“Noah,” Tabitha finally speaks, “We can’t go down there. The older Quills will not like the idea of us digging up old maps. They’ll know what we’re after.”

There we go, Alleluia muses as Tabitha’s face changes from exasperation to embarrassed regret. Even Noah is surprised.

“There’s nothing down there,” Tabitha says, far too quickly. “I already checked.” Xe looks away from Noah to Chevelure by the door, Zavian at Alleluia’s side, and Alleluia himself. “There’s nothing of that sort here, not in the Vault. The older Quills don’t speak of those maps or even entertain the idea of them, why would there be anything?”

“We both know that’s a lie,” Alleluia accuses. “The maps are here. You implied it yourself.” Tabitha flaps xir lips, but xe says nothing. Tabitha’s stammering only drives Alleluia to more confidence. He is taking it as a sign that something is here.

And he wants it.

“If we get the maps, we’ll leave,” Alleluia says, simply put. “If there are no maps, we’ll leave. Either way, we will leave, and you’ll never have to think of us again.” He leans forward and glances between the two Quills. Tabitha and Noah’s eyes find him. And this time, Alleluia does not feel that same fear when he looks in Noah’s eyes. A mild discomfort, but what burns brighter in Alleluia is determination to get what he wants.

He always wins.

His grin—haughty, by Noah’s words—cuts his face open, baring his teeth, the canines capped with gold.

“There’s no harm in looking, now is there?” Alleluia asks, a cunning coercive rumble to his voice that, to his minute delight, warms Tabitha’s cheeks.

Xe sighs and looks away from him. Noah beside xem slips his hands off his neck, clapping them together in thought.

“Alright,” he chirps, “I’ll help you find the maps. Alone, if Tabitha doesn’t want to come.”

His eyes, that vibrant unique hue, are sparkling again. This time not with tears, or jitters, or nerves. It is a sparkle Alleluia knows well. One he had and still has, ever since he was that wiry teen with big dreams of mapping the entire world through its dangers and wonders.

That there, in Noah’s eyes?

That is *adventure*.

It is there in Tabitha’s eyes too as much as xe wants to hide it. Something new, strange, and invigorating has come into their midst; for Alleluiah’s first time meeting Quill, it is not what he expected but he loves it, nonetheless.

“I’m going too. Since I’ve looked before.” Xe is still hiding something, but Alleluia lets xem pass. For now, that is.

“What a turn this is,” Alleluia says, still smiling. Tabitha will not look at him. He cannot help but sit back and laugh. It is a loud, booming one that shakes the chest and the weird energy out of the room. He stands and moves around the table to join the Quills’ side of the room. He comes right into Noah’s space. It is his turn to lock eyes with him, to take Noah by the face.

“I know that look,” Alleluia says, speaking low. “That’s the look of a hunter.”

Noah tries to look away, but he cannot. Those eyes are waiting, expectant for Alleluia to say something. He does not let himself get off game by that. Not again. Especially not when Alleluia glimpses that sparkle in Noah's eyes. With all the arrogance in his body, Alleluia asks a daring question.

"You want to get out of here," Alleluia says. "Don't you?"

Noah's eyes fly wide. He flinches back and away as if he has been shocked or struck. Alleluia raises an eyebrow.

"Am I on the nose?" Alleluia asks.

He grins as Noah bites his lip. Noah brings his stained hands together to rub at his palms and fidget.

"What did you say?" Noah asks.

Ah...pretending he did not hear, is he?

Alleluia smiles anyway, and yes, it is haughty. "I do not stutter, Noah."

It takes several ticks before Noah raises his gaze away from his hands and looks to Alleluia's face. Their growing number of staring contests gains another notch. Even so, that sparkle Alleluia saw once before is still there. It has become even more than that in such a fleeting time.

That, in Noah's vibrant eyes, is a *spark*.

A spark Alleluia finds himself ready and willing to entertain. He barks another laugh, but he does not look away from Noah. Not even for a second.

"You want to get out of here, don't you?" Alleluia asks Noah.

The Quill straightens his back. That spark alights into a fire.

Noah nods. He nods quickly.

NOAH

As the island and tree above are the stars and the sky, the Roots so below the Vault are the caves and the sea.

The water alongside the carved stone walkways glows a vibrant teal, the brightest parts reflecting on the ground. Noah can hear the water speaking; it is a different type of sound than that which runs from a faucet, for sure. It is a gentle hush, a soothing trickle. The teal is a cold but purposeful touch on the skin, and the soft music it makes matches the color of the pools. Already Noah's mind is moving to accustom himself to this place, like he is made to be down here where his world is finally, finally so different. Color, sound, sensation—all mingling the longer he stands where he, Alleluia, Chevelure, Zavian, and Tabitha entered.

He has known this place exists, but he has never thought much on it. He has only heard in passing that it is where the Vault keeps its deepest histories. And it keeps Candeo's secrets, too. The space that gives the Vault of Heaven its epithet.

Where they five stand is a wide platform at the base of a staircase Tabitha has snuck them to and down by casually diminishing their collective presence, all while xe weaved them around and through bookshelves and rooms to get here. It only tells Noah, and he's sure Alleluia and the others too, that he is not the only Quill among them who has thought of leaving this place.

Noah thinks back to his and Tabitha's conversation before Alleluia, Chevelure, and Zavian arrived.

Even if the truth is elsewhere...Quills cannot leave the tower.

Maybe they can.

Maybe they will.

Zavian's whistle cuts the silence; as vast and open as this place is, it does not echo.

"Sound doesn't carry down here?" he asks. Whether it is directed at Noah, he is not sure. He turns to Tabitha who, although xe's loosened up a bit now that they are all here, is still holding xir arms in a guarded position across xir stomach. Something unsettles xem about this place.

"It's dense with cosmic energy," Tabitha says. "This water is raw cosmos that feeds the tree and keeps it growing as the spheres pass."

A pause follows. "For seventeen spheres of concentrated cosmos, this doesn't feel that heavy," Chevelure muses aloud. It is true enough; the Balance Sphere of old is three-sixty times seventeen years ago...to this exact date, if Noah remembers right from his studies as a child.

"It decides who and what to let down here," Tabitha says. "It's not crushing us for a reason."

"How do you know this?" Noah asks, quietly, but still loud enough that Tabitha hears him.

Tabitha is hesitant to answer. “You’re not the only one of us who’s been looking into things they shouldn’t,” Tabitha says. Before anyone can respond to xem, Tabitha raises xir voice. “Keep your connections to the cosmos quiet and within. The Vault *is* still aware of us, just not giving us away yet.”

Tabitha starts down the path to the right of them, and Noah and the three others follow xem close behind. Noah continues staring around, taking in all details he can. Which surprisingly are not much. These walkways and the water are the only clear objects he can make out, even the deeper they go into the darkness. The rest of the area swallowed up in shadows that feel heavy. Consuming. He glances back to see the way up gone; it too has become consumed by the darkness. He also catches Alleluia and his sunset eyes as he makes to turn around, this time their eyes merely locking by chance.

Noah inhales and turns forward, taking a few nervous steps before finding his peace again. He supposes it is fitting now that embarrassment comes upon him; he *did* just embrace a man who he is certain is going to be the death of him.

Though now, down here in a place he had prepared to hunt for, but has not had to because of Tabitha, he is learning to question everything. Perhaps that prophecy did not mean Alleluia and his friends.

What did it mean? What is it about?

You want to get out of here, don’t you?

The more Noah finds out about this place he has called home his whole life, this place he has trusted since he was a toddler holding his first pen, the truer his answer to that question becomes.

Out, it seems, is his only path.

It is swiftly becoming his plan.

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After what feels like an hour of walking, taking cross paths on small platforms, standing still on moving stone that keeps its own path back and forth from one path to another, Tabitha brings them to another wide platform, the first in a while. Half of it extends into the shadows before them all.

“Wait,” Tabitha says, raising xir hand.

“Is this it?” Alleluia says. His tone is not surprised, so much as it is patient.

Noah watches Tabitha as xe steps to the center of the room. Xe crouches down, xir white and purple robes fluttering down about them like resting wings, the hems forming a purple circle around xirself, still cloaked in the white. Noah feels a shift in the air.

Cosmos.

It is like a blanket pulling over him then off his head as it flows toward Tabitha in the center. Xe begins to glow, ethereal, just like a moon.

Then the darkness pushes back, this obscure secret place suddenly opening to them all in a whoosh of amber light.

Before them now are not bookshelves, but a series of globes—fourteen by Noah’s quick count—each gleaming that teal glow, just like the water. They float above a curved table like judges at a podium.

Noah takes a cautious step forward. “These are...”

“The maps,” Alleluia says. His voice is so close to Noah he jumps; he notices just then that Alleluia has come to stand beside him, and he watches as Alleluiah continues walking, moving closer to Tabitha. His voice carries an air of amusement. “I knew you knew something more.”

Without a word, Tabitha stands and turns to face the group. Noah wants to ask so many questions, but his tongue ties into knots trying to form them. His breath also just catches in his throat as he looks Tabitha in the face.

Xir eyes are different.

No longer pale gold, they glow the same teal as the waters around them. Xe has synchronized to the Roots’ cosmos. Tabitha looks to Alleluia who is standing just before xir side by the time he stops walking.

“The maps you’re looking for are here,” Tabitha says. “I don’t know what will happen if you take them, but I can read them, so you’ll need me, too.”

“You can read them?” Noah asks. Tabitha fidgets. An excitement bubbles in Noah, despite his weariness. “Can you teach me?”

“Later,” Tabitha mutters. Alleluia starts toward the glowing teal orbs, following the curve of the table, stopping as he reaches the center one. Noah watches as Alleluia raises his hand to touch.

And for the first time since that first prophecy, the Vault speaks to Noah. Loud, clear. Disappointed. Pained.

I told you no, Noah.

Noah runs cold.

I told you...I told you...

The waters around them begin to slosh and stir. No longer peaceful, the water sounds sharp, a sound that cuts on Noah’s skin. The ground rumbles underneath Noah, too, and the room fills with light. Galactic colors swarm Noah’s vision, and among the clouds are visuals that flash clear with a boom yet haze out before another strikes. It scares Noah. It hurts. Each boom is like a deep resounding bell counting down time.

Yet Noah sees. As terrified as he has become, Noah does not look away.

He sees a deep place of stone and creatures violent and strange. A freezing place with reflecting walls. A golden moon, a glittering, dangerous mine, a Coliseum of black and white, a demon, temples under frozen lakes, catacombs of the sea—a dark library with shadows that eat, twelve broken ships full of foul things, a black starry sea, a gleaming purple eye, and where they stand now.

The Vault of Heaven.

“What’s happened to you?” Noah cries out. “Tell me!” Tabitha rushes to him, taking his arm, tugging him to follow but he does not move. These visions—what do they mean? “Help me understand!”

I told you, Noah. I cannot save you.

“Uh, Alleluia?” Chevelure calls out, “We need to move—”

The galaxy before his eyes snaps away as Noah blinks through his tears. He is back in the Roots, surrounded by terrified cosmos and people. Noah looks to Alleluia who seems the most unphased. He still reaches for one of the maps, yet the globes shoot up into the air just as Alleluia’s fingers finally contact. It is then that Alleluia jumps back, his head snapping up. Noah calls out to him, but the teal orbs sail straight toward Noah even as Tabitha and who must be Chevelure pull him back, away.

The orbs fuse into one as they press against Noah’s chest. He feels his heart pang and race, each beat a sharp pain, and it spreads across his chest, his torso. Noah grips the front of his robes in both fists and loses his feet. Thankfully Chevelure and Tabitha catch him.

“Noah—” Tabitha squeaks; is he crying for him?

“I’m fine,” Noah says. He stands upright just as Alleluia joins them. They two catch eyes once more, sharing the same conviction.

They must move. And quickly.

Tabitha starts them off, Zavian and Chevelure close behind. Alleluia stays back as much as he can with Noah, but Noah continues to fall behind him. His

chest aches. The pressure of the cosmos is surging into his chest, crushing his ribs. The Vault's groaning is in his ear, blinding him with color. And the very ground is crumbling beneath his feet; it breaks and breaks with each foot fall. Noah dares a look back, seeking the darkness that is surely close behind.

Instead of a wall of darkness, it is a wall of light.

Water.

A wave.

Noah whips back around, his chest pain be damned, and he forces himself forward.

The cruelty of this world will seek you out soon. And I cannot protect you from its evil.

The cruelty of this world is the summoner of this wave. The summoner is this place that Noah has only ever known as his home.

He realizes now that he was wrong. Very, very, very wrong.

The Vault of Heaven is going to kill him.

It cannot save him.

It holds the knife.

"Noah, hurry!" Tabitha screams, bringing Noah back to the terror at hand. He is reeling but he is too intent on running to lose his way now. The booming is in his ears, galaxy hues clouding his vision with each one. His body burns and freezes.

The ground before Noah starts to crumble away as Alleluia hits the platform that leads the way up. Chevelure and Zavian are rushing up—are those weapons drawn? —and Tabitha and Alleluia wait at the base of the steps. The ground shaking and crumbling with a quickening force trips Noah up. He stumbles, off his feet.

A boom of color flashes before his eyes—he is going to fall. Fall into the Vault's waters.

Drown.

He looks up once more and there is a hand there, held out to him.

An arrogant, haughty smile beset under sunset eyes wild with adrenaline.

Noah, with all the might left in him, snatches Alleluia by the hand.

Noah is tugged. He is caught. He falls unconscious.

His heart stops.

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Noah wakes to a familiar scene.

He is laid on something soft, his vision dark, his chest rising and falling slowly. Sore, but slow. A hand and something warm are pressed to his cheek, and there is a voice whispering prayers over him. Tabitha?

He realizes it is a language he has not heard before the longer he listens. Spoken before, at least. It is Namikaite, musical and lulling.

He opens his eyes to a stranger. He cringes hard and they shush him, their warm blue and pink eyes set in their deep mahogany brown face gentle and caring. Pink braids curtain Noah's vision on either side as he still stirs nervously underneath their gaze.

"Shh, sweet one," the person sings to him. He relaxes against his will. His brain screeches with concern—with visions of what happened before every time he blinks. A wail raises in his throat—

Yet this person still holds him, tenderly. His breaths are panicked and shaky out his nose as he finally regains his hands and grips the person over him by their arms. They nod, as if giving him permission to squeeze.

"Shh. It is all right. You're safe now."

"W-who?" Noah stammers. Thankful he can speak and gain some control over the situation. "Who are you? Where- where am I?"

"Alleluia brought you aboard," they say. They speak slowly, softly, but clear. "You're on a ship, *The Aurelia*. My name is Tsillah. She/her, please."

Noah swallows. His throat hurts, his eyes sting from tears. Tsillah brushes them away with her thumbs. Then she moves away from him, turning to something at her left. Noah takes this as a chance to look around him. He struggles, his chest aching, but he sits up. He is on a bed of golden sheets and linens, the walls purple, the floor tiled black and white. Noah glances for any windows, any doors. And for a sudden, worried moment, Tabitha.

Where is xe? Did xe come, too?

He jumps as Tsillah brushes his arm. He turns and she is holding up a cup. She sips the glass herself, then offers it to Noah.

“It’s for your good,” Tsillah says. “Drink. I’ll get your companion and Alleluia.”

Noah shakily takes the cup. If she is drinking it, it cannot be bad, can it?

“Tabitha? Xe’s here too?”

Tsillah nods. “You both survived the escape.” She reaches over and cups Noah’s cheek with a reassuring hold. “I’ll be right back. Please, drink.”

Noah remains still, even with the reassurance. Tsillah waits for him to raise the glass to his lips before she stands and glides toward the door. Her willowy form slides out, and she pulls the door shut behind her. Noah cannot hear anything as she does, so he returns to his task at hand, this drink.

He studies the cup’s contents. The drink is a jade color, not smoky but clear, as he can see his fingers through the other side of the glass. He swishes it about and it seems thin. It must just be a hydrating potion. Thus, as asked, he sips the drink. He blinks trying to calculate its flavor, then raises the glass back to his lips, drinking deeper. It is a curious taste, certainly not something he has tasted before if it truly is a simple potion. There may be no real taste or no real strength behind it that he can recognize, but he is beginning to soothe. His chest pain is dulling. It moves through his system quicker than anything he has taken for illness or pain before now.

Though a lot of things are different now, aren’t they?

Noah's breath hitches in his aching chest. Tremors take over him, and he knows it is not from the drink.

It hits him what this means. What his being here on Alleluia's ship means. It means he is out. He has left the Vault of Heaven, as a Quill. He is alive.

If Tsillah is true to her word, that he truly is on Alleluia's ship, it must mean he is going along with him, Chevelure, Zavian, and a greater crew, he suspects? If Tabitha is here as well, it must mean that, surely.

He figures he will get his answer soon as he drinks again. He flinches, however, when the door opens with a flourish. Coming in on a gust is Tabitha, and xe bounds across the room to Noah's side. Xe stops at the bedside and cups his face, tapping their foreheads together. He can feel xem shaking. Noah shuts his eyes, thankful for a familiar presence and touch.

Tabitha then backs away. Xe glances down, but flicks xir gaze back up wordlessly and claims the seat next to him. Noah sees Alleluia enter next with a lazy prowl, having changed out of his purple into something blue, like daylight.

"Tell him," Tabitha says, demanding it of Alleluia.

"I'm getting there," Alleluia says, taking a seat on the bed's edge. He gestures for Tabitha to hand him the pitcher beside xir on the bedside table. Xe does after a moment's hesitation, and Alleluia takes a swig from it once it is in his hands. "I'm sure you're feeling all kinds of awful, Noah. It took quite a bit of effort to stabilize you, so you're welcome." He takes another drink, nods approvingly. "How do you feel?"

Noah runs his finger up and down the smooth glass of the cup. “Honestly? That’s probably the best night’s sleep I’ve gotten in a while.” Alleluia’s chuckle at that makes Noah smile just a bit, but not much. He is still confused. Head swimming with questions. What happened seems too broad of a question. Asking how they fled, though a simpler question, is not one Noah is sure he wants the answer to.

“What happened to the maps?” Noah decides to ask. Alleluia seems pleasantly surprised by the question, but he is no less prepared. He does not skip a beat.

He reaches over and pokes Noah in the chest, right over his heart. Looking down, Noah sees his entire chest is no longer his brown, freckled skin. It is painted over with deep space. Vibrant golds, purples, blues, rich blacks, and reds stroke across his skin, each dusted with different concentrations of stars that glow.

What...What has happened to his chest?

Noah knows the surprise is plain on his face. And as Noah has come to know, Alleluia speaks smoothly in response, the surest person in the room always.

“*You* are the map,” Alleluia says. “You, young Quill, are my ticket to greatness. My crew’s ticket to infamy.” Alleluia’s hand moves from Noah’s line of sight, back into his own lap. “Tabitha has already agreed to come with us, of xir own free will, of course. Adventure is an enticer to all. It’s all down to you.

Though I'm sure you know by now I don't back down easily." Noah knows without looking that Alleluia's confidence is plain on *his* face. Bright in his sunset eyes. Sharp in his smile. "In your chest lies the fourteen maps to the Secrets of Candeo. Your ticket out of that tower and into the world it kept you from is within you."

Noah keeps his eyes on his chest. With each breath, the stars seem to brighten and dim. He really does...have something in his chest then.

Why is he not afraid?

Alleluia stands and comes closer, leaning between Noah and Tabitha to set the pitcher on the bedside table. He moves back to the bed's edge, but he does not resume his seat. Instead, he holds his hand out to Noah, the same way he had back when the Roots were collapsing.

"You know what I'm saying, right?" Alleluia says. "Are you with me, Noah?"

Noah considers Alleluia's hand this time. Studies his face. He is so sure. Like he knows there is no way in the darkest corners of the cosmos that Noah will or can even say no. Alleluia has already seen it in Noah's eyes, and he remembers it. The spark of a hunter, Alleluia has called it.

Noah pulls his lips into his mouth, looking to Tabitha. Xe wears a sureness on xir own face as well. It is true, then, that Tabitha has decided to stay with Alleluia's crew whether Noah intends to or not. Xe can read the maps. Noah simply carries them in his chest.

Noah tries to entertain the thought of going back. His heart clenches from the memories of those sweet, peaceful night hours where he and the Vault sat and just breathed. It...it must have been a ploy, all along. Or at least it must have known Noah's heart before he even knew he wanted to leave.

No...no, Noah cannot go back. He will not.

He shifts his gaze back to Alleluia. The man has said nothing. His face has yet to change in any amount. His hand, stable and unshaking, is still held out to Noah. Noah's fingers twitch away from the cup. He knows his answer; why does he hesitate?

It is adrenaline, he thinks. It is that thrill of hunting through the books for truth, magnified.

Despite the shakiness of his limbs, Noah raises his hand and places it in Alleluia's. He squeezes the man's broad palm.

"I'm with you," Noah says. He and Alleluia find each other's eyes once more, and what is shared there is not fear. Not competition. No searches. Just sunset eyes of the eventide and vibrant, mystic purple of the night.

Alleluia bends, changing his grip on Noah's hand to bring Noah's knuckles to his lips. Noah's cheeks flush with color at the gesture.

"Then I warmly welcome you, Noah, to our quest," Alleluia says, his breath hot against Noah's knuckles.

"Welcome to the Cursed Campaign. Welcome to *greatness*."

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