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Sentient Potential

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MA Dissertation: Creative Writing
WCRW8001A
Submitted 29 March 2025

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Novel

Sentient Potential

Part I

Chapter 1

I took a double shot of inhibidor this morning to numb my magiary from the Barrio's loud feelings. But the woozy collective ennui of Monday morning still prickles at my skin, my body's way of telling me it is starting to sense, to find expression, in the flesh, for feelings in the ether.

It would be easier if Sensorials didn't congregate, but the forecourt of my apartment block is rowdy as usual, even with the flickering lightballs and acrid smell of stale dullsage joints. The sentido común is thickest in here. The emotional detritus of a neighbourhood coagulates in the magial field and pounds into my nervous system. Trying to make a beeline from the stairwell to the door is all I can do to avoid the pummelling of involuntary fury and rage and infatuation and joy and whatever else it is everyone wants to feel around me this early in the morning.

Neighbours are gossiping between puffs of dullsage and slurps of wakesage, debating this morning's seerscopes and Societal politics. The school flybuses haven't arrived yet, so teens are clustering near walls with peeling pink paint and campaign posters for the Subcouncil elections tacked over adverts for budget-friendly seerscope writing retreats and cogniscience sharpening. I see in their eyes the weariness of the young struggling to make sense of their burgeoning abilities on top of normal adolescence. Soon they'll also be allowed to chug industrial-grade inhibidor to pretend that they can tolerate the City outside.

Isabel is in her Progressive pink shirt again, which is earning her plenty of suspicious looks. She calls me, abandoning the old woman who won't read her pamphlet on inter-synodic healthcare reform. 'Bienoyente's rally is tonight. We need you there, presenciado,' she says over the echoey din.

'Not tonight, Isabel, please,' I tell her while trying to navigate through the crowd. Being near another Sentient I know so well makes my body tingle as our magiaries sense, resonate and bend towards each other's. 'And how many people do you really think will show up for a Progressive candidate anyway?' She follows with one of her politely political expressions, her movements clacking with an assortment of beaded necklaces that should not fit on her small frame. 'Isabel, are those cargitas?' I ask, nodding to the beads.

She touches them as if in prayer, which is absurd for her. 'They're from each of the other synods. Working class people, Lowburb women, Midburb students on bursaries.'

'So, all the constituencies who already vote for the caucus?'

Her ánimo sizzles with irritation. ‘Their ánimos bring my soul into balance, unlike that thing,’ she says, eyeing the carga común at the doorway. We let others touch it ritually on their way out. I’m not interested in the instant nervous shock of centuries of communal emotionalia settled into the small crystal. Neither is she, but those cargitas will wear her out.

Outside, the floating traffic whooshes through the streetgap in the crammed third streetlevel cityscape. ‘I need a few people to show up for Bienoyente, please, just to make it look like she has a chance. She’s a good candidate. Your mother said she’d be there.’

‘Of course she did.’ I see a Guardsman by the streetgap railing a few paces up the block. The Sensorials around him don’t look disturbed, but the sentido común rattles with weariness.

Isabel sees him too. ‘Have you noticed they’re sending more Upperburb Guard down here?’

‘An Upperburber was murdered there. What did you expect? Inter-synodic harmony?’

‘I’m done with all this Sensorial solidarity shit,’ she mumbles, clutching one of the cargitas. She looks around the flybusstop in bewilderment, perhaps only discovering now that her own people don’t share her insight into the intersecting oppressions of Midburb life.

‘Could be worse, presenciada,’ I say. ‘We could be Lowburbers.’

She acknowledges my snideness with a small tilt of her head. She’s about to reply when we both sense my sister’s characteristic blend of torpor and irritation in her feelingstream. Leonor, wearing a cloak over her black Societal Intelligence Bureau uniform, squeezes my arm while saying, ‘You scared off Señora Pense, Isabel. Now she thinks the Progs want to give her son’s job prospects to Lowburbers.’

‘That’s not what I said. Or thought. That woman’s cogniscience is so inaccurate. You sure you don’t want to leave your own Upperburb sympathising securocrat—’

‘I’ll be at your little rally,’ says Leonor before telling me, ‘Apparently Señora Recibiz’s latest seerscope column is about you.’

‘Fuck,’ I groan. ‘Not again.’

‘I’m surprised you still read that fictive trash,’ scoffs Isabel.

‘It’s fun,’ says Leonor. ‘And sometimes she gets if half right. Even if she’s making far too much money on it. I’m off to my paymasters in the hegemony.’ She winks at Isabel before heading off towards the streetlift.

‘Do I have to feel your rage so often?’ I moan. The flybus rattles to a hover and there’s a rush for the doors. ‘I’ll think about tonight, good?’

Isabel nods slowly. She’ll sense my indecision.

The 7:50 flybus is its usual joyride. At least today I've got a seat, but I'm squashed up against the greasy window, with a hairy Electrient next to me chewing hexic gum. Every few minutes she burps discreetly and tries to contain the needles of electricity that flutter across her arms, followed by a giggle and a slurpy sniff. The only passenger who is out of place is the Pyrrhic hipster two rows ahead of me, floating a fireball above his stuck-out tongue.

The flybus jiggers whenever it turns through a hovering intersection, then the rear sways drunkenly for a few blocks. I can only envy people in their private flycars around us. There's a family of five an airlane below us. Two Kinetics are pulling school uniforms on resistant kids.

Most people are ogling politely at their crystalpods, performing privacy even after a cohort of Sensorials got on board. Isabel and my mother would say flybuses are the microcosm of artificial awkwardness between otherwise similar Potents. I chuckle to myself as the flybus pulls out of the airlane to hover to its next stop. When the doors open, the cabin fills with the roar of a crowd nearby. 'Sorry, brummas,' says the voice of the flybus driver in brutal Lowtongue. 'The Guard, they be block the streetgaps. This flybus go a stop here.'

The groans are immediate and effusive. 'Fucking Guard,' says the Electrient. 'Her Supreme Sunshine wants a little sky clearance so she can glide to her palace in peace in that gold carriage of hers.'

We're decanted from the flybus onto a plaza, still four streetlevels above ground, just where the sleek Upperburb buildings start to litter the skyline. I'll have to find a creative way to get to work – the most direct path to the Needle is the one being blocked by the Guard. I can see them hovering upwards to halt traffic. Hooters are blaring in vain against the blockage, the sounds echoing viciously against the facades of the surrounding buildings here and on the final streetlevel above. I can just about see the edges of the protest and I'm sure there's a hint of fire. It would be unusual for Pyhrrics to be involved in such proletarian activities, but these days even that isn't entirely surprising.

If I don't find a thinner crowd, my nerves will fray. I plan my life to avoid masses of people. My body battles at the best of times to feel and interpret its own emotional world. Adding even the surface-level passions of others is overwhelming. I find a back route on my crystalpod and walk fast, trying to calm the rhythm of my breath.

The side streets are sparser, thank the Magon, but the buildings around here are intrusively large, beautiful but austere. Some of these towers are as old as the Society itself. The monuments are meant to impose and awe, to remind the mere passerby with his mere Midtongue accent that even our refugee state is capable of the architectural ephemera of the Impotent world.

A block away from the Needle my nerves start to flicker again. It doesn't take long before I hear what must be the tail end of the protest that has disrupted so much traffic. It might be a few blocks away still, but it must be a massive crowd. There isn't anything coherent I can make out, just the rumble resonating. It's so loud I barely notice my name, a thin voice against the clammer, and sudden—

Suddenly panic panic why the panic can't think can't focus the feeling can't see must calm the panic calm the panic push it out

push

it

down

down the deep the deep place so far

can't let it come back what is this where am I

just forget it that's what I must do

to calm the panic bury the feeling shove it down to the rip

rip

I rip my arm out of a grasp.

My ears are ringing, heralding a jolt of dizziness. Too many emotions streamed at once I couldn't disambiguate couldn't think straight think straight think not again not this fucking thing again get control over this fucking—

'Miguel?' a voice is saying, pulling me back from the feelingstream. It's faintly familiar. 'Miguel … Vidente, verit? Sorry, my vir, didn't mean to jump you out.'

I realise I'm leaning against the streetgap railing, close enough to see the streetlevels stretching below. He's holding his hands out as if pacifying a madman. That emotional barrage was a morass of misery and despair, but he's smiling with that same oily, chummy, charismatic verve I remember so nauseatingly well.

'Taye Velox,' I say, but I'm drowned out by a roar from the protest. I try again more loudly, aware of how my Midtongue jars against his oozing, flippant, patrician Hightongue. I remember that accent too, and the skin a few too many shades too dark for his Upperburb noblesse.

'What are the chances of clashing out with you? Vir, it's been a max time!' he says, proffering a hand.

I have to find a way to avoid touching him again. Not that I should care. This is the friendliest Taye Velox has ever been to me. Come to think of it, we haven't spoken more than once or twice. His hand is still outstretched. How rude can I be?

'Oh, shit,' he says, pulling his hand back. 'I miscogged. You're Sentient, verit? Pause up, did I just—'

'It's fine,' I say, not sure why I'm being so accommodating. It might have something to do with my body still shaking. I can't feel my hands, my heart is pounding and I'm sweating profusely. And my stomach isn't sure if it should be vomiting. I stand up with as much dignity as I can muster. 'It's a hazard of being Sentient. Getting hits of random people's psyches.'

For a moment he seems flustered, but he recovers quickly. He's moving with the practised grace of a man who knows he's a charmer and always gains from the manipulations he deploys. It's a trait that made him seem slippery back when we were in the Service. Together. He socialised in a very well-to-do, broey, snobbish group that avoided me.

'I didn't wit you worked around here,' he says, keeping his tone steady.

'A few blocks away. Office of Public Defence.'

'You're a public defender? That I respect, vir. Superious!' He smiles as if to offer the great boon of his consideration. Slick chumminess.

'And you're working for your mother, clearly,' I say. He's about to ask how I could divine that, but I nod to the pink ribbon attached to his lapel.

'Yes, I'm a legislative aide for the Progressives,' he half yells as another rumble, this one sounding worryingly like an explosion, shakes through the street.

'Is that protest one of yours then?' I ask.

'No, vir,' he says with a hint of menace. 'Some squabble between a Barotic and an Aquial last night, apparently. A Pyrrhic Guardswoman was merged up in it. Now all three synods are protesting against each other. Max superious mess. Not our doing – Glouw torches up enough opposition by herself. Ye Sensorials don't like voting for the big caucuses.'

'Did you run into me so you could electioneer?'

He shrugs. 'Don't blame me for trying.'

'We don't exactly vote. Our will is divined.' I have the strangest urge to reach out to him, to connect, to join this lofty club that dresses so well and runs into old virs on side streets by the Society's most venerable buildings, to reach over – and hug him. Where the hech did *that* come from?

Something is thrumming between us. I'm losing my grip my grip again my grip on my sense of self. There's an energy – a magial one. Usually, I can only read people this clearly when I'm touching them or around them a lot.

This is wrong this is an urge to hug to enfold him in my arms protecting him soothing him and run run away numb myself numb myself too much to face why here the pain is coming the pain is coming to break through the calm the pain it pulls down down to drown …

This man is in turmoil.

The conversation has reached the point of awkwardness but I let it linger. The magial field is vibrating, pulsing and pulling. Fuzzy shadows are flickering at the edges of my consciousness. I have to prolong this.

He's gripping the shoulder strap of his bag tightly. It's a singular display of vulnerability in an otherwise easeful demeanour. 'Anywise,' he says eventually, 'it was firm vizzing you, Miguel.'

Without thinking (this is all feeling now), I extend a hand. This is risky. I could get knocked out. He eyes my hand with confusion at first. But then, he meets it vigorously. I brace for my grasp on reality to break down and it breaks it breaks down down down and crying everywhere shame hurls itself into itself I see it and burning monstrosity get out get out get out this stupid fucking feeling why shame and shame and shame and calm the shame calm the guilt our hands are still in grasp gripping tightly all I can do to hold on almighty aching grips my whole frame I am

myself

but

not myself

muscles and nerves

and breath and heart flinch

then ease into the flow of feeling

I want to run away but too late the reckoning approaches

I am alone and it approaches but I can control, I control, I control the stream …

He's gripping too and staring at me. He's confused, sensing the clear intimacy of the moment and soothed by this surprising connection, but he'll have no idea how much I'm sensing, how hard it is to stay lucid. My body is acclimating to his emotional soul – his ánimo – now. His emotionality is finding place in my flesh and heart, my organs and tissues loosening to find space for the way another human being expresses and lives his feelings through flesh. Even our

heartbeats, I suspect, are synchronising. I tense automatically to avoid touching the bleakness beneath the stream, as if my whole body knows to reject this shadow.

And then, whether because I need to or he needs to, I pull him towards me. I clasp him fiercely. His clothing dampens the connection somewhat, but the roiling despair, the guilt, the need for connection continue to pulse. At first, Taye's body is stiff. Then he wraps his arms around me intensely, and shakes.

I don't know how long we remain like this. We must be a bizarre sight, a Sensorial and a Kinetic embracing each other in the middle of a busy flypath, a protest grumbling just streets away.

When he breaks, he does so abruptly. Then he clears his throat and the detached charisma is resurrected. 'Firm seeing you, Miguel,' he says as if we had merely exchanged pleasantries, and walks off.

That massive feeling-cocktail recedes quickly and within a few seconds the connection is severed.

Chapter 2

I get another bottle of heavy-duty inhibidor before I dare enter the office. It feels like I've run a marathon and it's barely 9 o'clock. I take a liberal swig, grimace at the metallic taste and wait for the familiar fuzz to hit. The last thing I need is to have residues of Taye Velox interjecting while I work. As it is, I'm sure my gait is different. His ánimo lingers – and this is not something I'm used to at all.

The neoclassical Needle's interior is palatial. Lofty domed ceilings depict deific scenes of Potent peoples fleeing various episodes of attack during the 17th-century Purges. The words *witch* and *bruja* and other translations are branded on the flesh of each Potent character to remind the naive spectator of our forebears' suffering. The terms are totally verboten in polite speech, but here they gleam in painted blood.

My crystalpod chimes to list the cases that have been assigned to me. Four – a heavy start to a week. Three cases are routine Exit Authority appeals. Not riveting, but I'll revel in the reduced cognitive demand. The other case is trickier: an Electrient has been arrested for attempting to escape the Isle in a flycar that isn't hers but has somehow found itself into her apparently astonished possession. A night of 'innocent fun' with 'upstanding' friends and a few too many sage martinis led to her being deposited in a flycar that 'seriously did look like a taxi'. So standard Electrient fare.

I've only been in the Needle for a few seconds before I feel the magial scrubbers' effect. Despite how late I am, I pause just for a moment to relish it. I inhale slowly and feel the world realign. The last feelings that have been pulsing through the inhibidor fade away.

I love it. In this place, I don't get hit with people's emotional debris. What I feel is my own, entire and definable. I get to use words and inference and technique to navigate. I can interact just like non-Sentients do every day, through ambiguous social cues and the risk that anyone might well be an effusive bullshitter. Here, people can be enigmas. Law is bound by language and precedent – with room for rhetorical flourishes and politicised interpretation and prejudices, sure, but it's exact, it's hedged and it's graspable. Sometimes all I need to keep sane is the knowledge that I'm spending hours focused on a single statutory line, while cocooned in the scrubbers' emotional silence.

I descend to the Exit Authority level and try to locate my first client. People with means can get their exit permit appeals escalated to their own synods' tribunals. Down here are consigned the ordinary folk, unlucky Midburbers and many Lowburbers, who are trying to get an ancient and creaking bureaucracy to give them the slightest concessions. I see a few colleagues who have found nooks in which to conference with their first clients of the morning.

'Is it Isa Calo?' I ask the young man I think is my first charge. He's leaning against a pillar. A few spindle-thin icicles are forming on his eyebrows. 'I'm Miguel Vidente. I've been assigned as your public defender.'

'M'brumma, you go a get me off this fuckland?' he asks in a Lowtongue accent so thick he might as well be eating putty.

'Depends to which fuckland you're referring. You mean court?'

'Nah,' he scoffs. 'This island. This fucker S'ciety.' He burps out a puff of chilled air. Great. 'The protest be a keg ousside. You speak Lo, m'brumma? Or you think you be a Upper because you be a gold-like lawyer?'

I don't have the mental bandwidth this morning to code switch well. My Lowtongue sounds snobbish on the best of days, but I clear my throat and try. 'Then, m'brumma' – he snorts but nods with some appreciation at the effort – 'we need a help you nap a exit permit.' My tongue is sloshing through the grammar. 'This judge on duty aday, she be Pyrrhic, chime? So, we go a start by not give her a Cryonic brumma who wann a breathe ice in h'face, chime?'

He eyes me comically. If I had access to my magiary right now, I could try to see how much of a facade this mach is presenting, but I prefer not to know. 'I juss need one permit, juss a leave for a bit,' Isa explains, blowing a ring of ice breath from his tongue.

'You might wann a nap y'voice low-like,' I urge. 'If these brummas hear that you might flee, they a go make sure you never leave under any chances. I see here you been apply for leave a travel to Dakar? But tha's where you been for y'S'cietal Service, chime? They like not let Lowers leave. You know that.'

'Yeah, true-like,' Isa says as if I'm the one without legal expertise. 'Why would I wann a go somewhere I not know?'

My crystalpod pings to notify me that Isa's appeal is up. He follows me lethargically towards the court chamber. 'And you been give y'reason as "personal enrichment"? That not a go work. Exit permits for personal reasons be onny give for very specific things and very specific, tight sponsorship. The bossas need a be sure that you not a go flee and sure-like that you not a go chat with Impotents. You can't go for fun!'

‘I am not going for fun,’ he says in an awfully clunky Midtongue. ‘I’m going to see something else than Potent buildings.’

Maybe I can get him employed as a cleaner at a Service base. Good Lowburb job. I guide him to a bench at the back of the shabby courtroom. Judge Flintsen is already whining about the coffee not being hot enough and that counsel is unprepared. ‘Your client has merged around Johannesburg twice in the last two years already,’ she is saying, a strand of hair literally starting to smoulder. She’s holding her head with both hands, as if she’s been on duty for hours already. ‘Once for Service and once for “ethnography”. Now he wants to ring back for “meditative tourism”? Why doesn’t he just fly into an Impotent city centre and stream rainbows out of his nose just so the Impotentate wits we exist?’

‘Why you real-like wann a go to Dakar?’ I ask Isa as softly as I can. ‘What you say to me be secret-like.’

‘Can’t a brumma escape?’

‘Tell not the judge that. She a go lock you, brumma. I can try a nap a permit for work. But you muss look keen-like.’

Isa merely shrugs in response. I remind myself that my job has to have meaning – albeit dreary, repetitious and filled with maches like Isa Calo – and prepare myself to argue before Judge Flintsen for what will likely be the first of a few rounds today.

Chapter 3

I wanted Taye Velox to have been expunged from my system by the time I left work, but once I leave the scrubbered zone, his residue is stuck in the corners of my musculature. My stomach keeps clenching at random intervals and I could swear my shoulders keep hunching.

The airlaneblock from earlier has apparently been lifted and there's no sign of the protest, which probably means it was 'handled'. At least I can get back home unhindered. The passengers in the flybus are in the liminal zone between work fatigue and home refuge, so I don't have to deal with anyone's intense emotional drama during the commute. I just need to be.

I can always tell when the flybus enters the Barrio Tercero. It isn't an aesthetic change. The neighbourhood bears much the same shabby, run-down look as other areas on the streetlevel this far out from the city centre. The change is sensed. I start to feel like I'm swimming through a liquid muddle of sensations. Tonight, the sentido común is agitated, like a tired baby refusing to sleep.

I haven't stepped more than a few feet off the flybus before I realise that I have been identified as the day's man in need.

'Ah, Miguel, mijo!' crones Señora Recibiz, who has dragged her twins in a worryingly flimsy pram to greet me. She's smelling of cheap scapesage. 'I told your mother, I said, Patricia, Patricia, escúchame, there have been dark, dark clouds in the futuario and I'm telling you they're over Miguel. That's what I told her. I knew, I knew there was something that was about to happen. And now look!'

'Now look what?'

She refracts a lump of text from her crystalpod. It's her seerscope column, adorned in its typical gaudy colours and crammed between flashing adverts. Her hand is moving too quickly for me to make out the words. 'Señora, there are dark clouds in your seerscopes every week. It's a motif,' I say.

'You keep coming up. Yes. Every night, I see your face.' If her expression is meant to show worry, she's failing. She looks hungry for gossip.

'Thank you for your support, señora, but I need to get home for cena.'

'Tell your mother that Maria and I are here if you need us and I'm here if she needs me for a private scoping,' she says as she perambulates away. I steel myself. Señora Recibiz's

clairvoyance is about as clear as a swamp, but if even she knows something's up with me, half the hexed Barrio will, especially if her ansimana finds out.

And the forecourt is overflowing with opinions.

'Miguel, keep strong, mach!' says a woman I think I've never met.

'Now you know to keep away from those Kinetics!' says Isaac. I catch his ánimo intimating as usual towards sacia with me. He's twirling fingers with his latest saciamañero, a muscular Cogniscient who eyes me with some sed.

'Take off some steam. You need a saciado, mach, or a lascivano,' says the ancient but weirdly always present Señor Pensado. 'Your pensario is calling out for a lascivano! Let me find someone for you.' He squints into his crystalpod. 'Unless, Isaac, you want to share?' Isaac winks.

'No, he's craving consumidad,' replies the woman, who is taking far too much interest in a stranger's relational needs.

Their worry is genuine. There isn't much privacy in a community where our interior lives bleed into the air around us for everyone to feed on. But the accuracy and strength of their readings vary wildly. As is the case right now. And they're blocking my way to the staircase.

'Why would you bond with a Kinetic, Miguel?' asks Pensado. 'What do they know of our ways of loving?'

'I didn't bond!' I say too energetically. The group smirks at my thoughts and feelings, which must be leaking fluidly now.

'Well, he's all over your ánimo,' says Isaac after I push through them and run up the stairs.

The third-floor corridor is, mercifully, empty of Sensorials, but a pair of Neo-Druid missionaries is proselytising. The blue tinge to their hair suggests they're Aquials. 'Brother!' one of them calls. I curse at being seen. At least they can't sense me, but I'll have to pass them to get to my apartment door. 'Brother, we're emissaries of the Neo-Druid Siblinghood. Can we share a message with you about the peace of the Way?'

'Respectfully,' I tell them, aware my tone is not echoing my meaning, 'I'm happily atheist.'

The taller one smiles placidly and bows. 'We seek no Divine to worship, only harmony with the wisdom that Magic affords, the expansiveness beyond magium,' they say.

I notice my hands are shaking. I'm too tired for this. 'Go in harmony,' I say, hoping their customary greeting will mollify them, and move awkwardly past.

'There is peace for you in liberating yourself from the confines of the synod,' says the shorter one. 'Join us for a Midnight Meet. You will find so many friends in the Siblinghood.'

I want to tell them I can sense plenty of hostility and judgement in their ánimo. I settle with, ‘I have a meet of my own tonight. A campaign rally for a Progressive Subcouncil candidate.’

They’re disgusted long enough for me to escape.

When I’m through the door to the apartment, I breathe in deeply and let the silence dampen the irritation. Even in quiet at last, I’m queasy and drained. It’s been a day of being acted upon. I don’t even know what I want for myself.

‘You bonded a *Velox*?’

‘Fuck, Leonor, can I have a minute to arrive home?’ I moan.

My sister is clutching the pentagram brooch on her Societal Intelligence Bureau uniform. My reverie must have interrupted her thoughts in the middle of getting changed, which has now taken a backseat to a mind-mined quest. ‘A Velox? You bonded an actual, honest-to-fuck, Kinetic Velox?’

Her excitement is bubbling inside me, which is making it hard to maintain the irritation I think I entered this conversation with. ‘Is this the kind of accuracy your superiors can expect from you every day at work, in actual cognigraphy of people’s actual thoughts?’

‘I think Mamá’s going to finally make you her favourite child now. A Velox!’

‘I didn’t bond anyone, Leonor. I ran into a Velox. By chance. On a flywalk. We hardly spoke for more than a minute. Plus, you know Upperburbers don’t know how to bond. It’s all friendship or fucking.’

She looks disappointed but I catch a shot of glee. ‘So linear,’ she says, unclasping the brooch, ‘but it was steamy. He looked like he enjoyed it. It’s been so long since you’ve had a sedado, since you’ve had any sed at all.’

‘He’s a conocido. You’re the one who likes sed.’

Her tone softens. ‘Recibiz confirmed you’re the focus of today’s seerscope.’

‘Yeah, I noticed. Everyone has recommendations downstairs.’

‘You might want to stand away from the door in a few seconds.’ I didn’t need the warning. Our mother’s unmistakeable workday evening mix of fluster and exhaustion is approaching. I instinctively start throwing up small mental distractions to keep her from probing too deeply.

‘Doesn’t work, mijo,’ she says before she even gets through the door. She’s carrying a voluminous stack of scripts and seems to have taken half her office home in various bags dangling precariously from her small frame. She somehow always manages to look windswept, as if perpetually running late. Why she bothers trying to tie her thick, dark hair into a bun is

beyond me. She has to keep blowing against the strands that dangle in front of her eyes. ‘Heching Neo-Druids are out there again. Did they catch you?’ She throws everything, including heels, on one of the lounge sofas, in between other bits of academic detritus the room has come to host. Somehow sitting there doesn’t seem comforting without the unmarked essays and niche journals supplementing the cushions. ‘Get some dinner going, won’t you? I need to be ready for Isabel’s campaign event with Bienoyente. Not that it’ll do any good. The hembra thinks Subcouncil elections have impact.’

I select a ramen meal from the hovering screen that refracts off the crystalslab on the kitchen counter. Molecules swirl into smoky shapes above the glossy surface as the meal is printed.

Mamá returns while squinting at her crystalpod. ‘Annals take turbulent tone. Tiredness pervades dreamscapes, says leading seerscoper,’ she reads. ‘It’s mid-year. We’re all tired. How is that news? Unhinged people. Recibiz actually told me I’m highly fertile this month! This because of a rabbit she’s been seeing hopping around her dreams. She—’

Hech it. That name was enough to trigger a cascade of mental associations. I try to summon a random song to drown the thoughts out, but it’s too late. ‘Miguel? Taye Velox?’

‘Of all the things my brain just opened up to you, that’s your focus? Also, how do you know who he is?’

She leers at me over her glasses. She has the keen, incisive eyes of an academic, wrinkled at the corners from concentration. ‘He’s a Velox. And he was a common … motif for a few months in your head, about – what? – a year or two ago,’ she says ruefully, as if the things I chose to fixate on in the privacy of my own mind weren’t ever excavated by her. ‘I’m sure he was in one of my classes.’

‘You taught him?’

‘I recognise all of your sedados in the world. Leonor’s too. How can I not? They’re imprinted on my mind!’

This isn’t healthy parenting, I think back to her loudly, imagining echoes for effect. She responds with internal, and definitely directed, giggles with a sardonic undertone and grabs a bowl of ramen now finished constituting itself on the crystalslab surface.

‘You could do a lot worse than him,’ she says aloud, relocating a stack of books from a dining room chair.

‘Is that permission to bond outside of the synod?’

‘You can always try, but Kinetics don’t respond well. You know that. They’re too fixated on their ancestral marriages and transactional friendships. If they’re even capable of friendships.’

‘Critical analysis of the zeitgeist as always, Mamá.’

Leonor and I both have to clear seats and table space, which we do with habitual indifference. The only space left uncluttered is around the family cargazo. The small, bronze-sided box thrums with decades of whatever Videntes have had thoughts of or felt near it. ‘Why do I keep reading images of him in a Service uniform in your pensario?’ asks Leonor.

‘He was stationed in Johannesburg with me during my Societal Service.’

Leonor and Mamá chime a harmonic ‘aaaaaaaah’. I don’t want to know what part of their telepathic repartee I just confirmed. They are strikingly alike in appearance, yet their demeanour couldn’t be more different. Mamá fidgets as she sits, looking around as if the entire sensory world is hers to dissect with her intellect. She slouches for a few seconds, then gesticulates grandly, then stares at one of us while reading what thoughts we’re entertaining. Leonor sits with serenity – which, I know only too well, is a total mask.

I let an awkward silence stew for a few seconds, refusing to rise to any bait they think they’re setting. My nerves still feel overstimulated. Mamá is giving me a look that suggests I’m missing something obvious. ‘He’s not my sedado. You just want him to be,’ I say.

‘Miguel,’ says Leonor, ‘your thoughts are screaming otherwise.’

‘His ánimo is stuck in me. That’s all,’ I say. ‘I just got blasted with it all at once. You’d think this is the one synod where people’s feelings would be validated.’

Mamá laughs sardonically. ‘Validated and opined on, all at once.’ With a slight wince, she places her right hand on the cargazo. ‘¿Nos juntamos?’

‘We don’t have to do this every day,’ I grumble.

‘I second that,’ says Leonor.

‘The nexo roots us to our blood and chosen family of the past, present and future,’ Mamá starts intoning, ignoring Leonor’s snort. This is the rhythm of dinner debate in the Vidente household. ‘One ritual. I’ve never asked for more. This is the one I choose.’

‘You’re a philosophy lecturer,’ I say. ‘Every second article you publish has the word “critical” in it. This is violent.’

A flash of her annoyance fires through my stomach, but she replaces it quickly with forced patience. ‘Maybe I’ve trained you two too well. The sensoria in this cargazo are old and fuzzy and probably very random snippets of our family’s boring lives, but this represents something like a root, nonetheless. So, please, juntámonos.’

‘That’s not even how Impotent Spanish speakers pronounce those words,’ mutters Leonor, who holds out one hand to me and places the other on the cargazo. ‘You’d think when we appropriated their language, we’d at least have the decency to use it properly.’

Mamá looks partially proud. ‘This from the woman who spent all of a month watching Valladolid and now is an expert on the language? Nos juntamos. Nos juntamos en el nexo de sangre y poder.’

I place my left hand on Mamá’s and put the other on the cargazo. Leonor does the same, linking her hand with mine. The nexo flows instantly with the accumulated perceptions of each of my family’s magiaries and the old storage of two hundred years of Vidente living. Random scraps of light flutter before my mind’s eye, bursts of fuzzy sounds prickle into my ears and a cacophonous swirl of rage, terror, joy, thrill and resignation bubble through my heart and stomach. I catch snippets of the cogniscience of my mother and sister. I hear thoughts and see thoughts, ethereal and nightmarish. Mamá is sensitive to immediate, surface-level thoughts. Leonor catches mainly what’s deeper – subconscious ramblings and memories. They bend and torque.

No one needs to face the collective traumas of his family in a daily wallop. Even so, today the nexo feels headier than normal. There’s an almost drunken quality to the stream. It’s … it’s toxic abrasive thumping yearning reaching screeching searing shame again the hurt below hide the horror bury the horror the—

My head nearly hits the table.

We never end the nexus quickly – for very good reason. I have whiplash and a vicious ringing in my ears. I’m panicking for reasons I can’t place.

Mamá and Leonor are staring at me.

‘Fuck, you’ve been spiked,’ says Leonor.

‘What?’

‘He’s spiked you with seersage.’

‘Seersage? Who?’ I grip the table to stop myself collapsing from off the chair.

‘These people think Sensorial bodies exist to be their personal punching bags,’ says Leonor. I can’t understand her sudden ire.

Mamá asks, ‘Mijo, have you taken seersage?’

‘If I’d taken seersage, I’d be comatose. Right?’

‘You and Velox, was there physical contact between you?’ So, she couldn’t see it clearly from the visuals I’ve thought around her. I remember the hand on the arm, the handshake … the

embrace. Those memories will be visible to her now. ‘None of that interaction seemed off to you?’ she asks.

‘No. Mamá, I’m not perfect, but why would I take seersage, or let someone spike me with it? I know what it does to Sensorials. You’ve drilled it into us.’

Her eyes are unfocused. ‘There is something foreign in your pensario. I know that hue, the pattern in the thoughtstream.’

Mamá’s ánimo dips into sombre and unreachable tones. Leonor makes to speak, but something, perhaps a thought exchange between them, stops her.

‘I felt his ánimo clearly, yes,’ I say, conscious of how defensive I’m sounding, ‘and it was intense, yes, but it’s gone now. Mostly. This is nonsense.’

‘Have you ever sensed an ánimo that strongly?’

‘Why are you asking if you’re reading it from my head anyway?’ I snap.

‘Leonor and I experience our magiarios differently to you, but from the way you’ve remembered it and what we just read in the nexo, something like seersage was involved somewhere and it’s in you.’

Leonor adds, ‘You should report it so he faces the consequences.’ That penchant for exactness and justice is a core of her ánimo. I thought it was mine for most of my childhood. So much of my identity back then was an amalgam of other people’s emotional output. ‘You’ve been violated.’

Mamá puts the cargazo back in the centre of the table. ‘Granted, but what exactly would reporting him to the Guard accomplish, mija? Even if we had evidence?’ she sighs. ‘He’s a Velox. His mother is the Master of the most powerful, influential and prestigious synod in the Society and the Progressive Caucus. Get to your guía. Miguel. He can help you expunge this, or at least help you handle the feelingstream.’

‘I’ll pull strings at the Bureau. Even the Veloxes need to learn that they can’t abuse the bodily autonomy of people they think are beneath them.’

‘Bodily autonomy?’ I moan. ‘Leonor, we pick up people’s private thoughts and feelings without their consent all the time. And I don’t have seersage in me. You’re jumping to conclusions based on what you saw briefly in that stupid ritual.’

Her frustration – or maybe Mamá’s, or even my own, because at this point, I can’t tell whose, but it’s broiling – is pushing me to lash out. ‘We spy on people! We look in on the most private parts of their lives and we never ask their permission. We’re twisted, automatic voyeurs. At least you get to turn your cogniscience into jobs but some of us are just hit with emotional

junk every fucking day of our lives!' I'm screeching now. 'None of it makes any sense. I don't even know if I understand it right or if I can interpret whatever the hech it is I get from people. It's just *stuff*! It's just splutters and whiffs of nonsense. And you know what? For once, I felt I *got* someone outside the Synod. I felt like I connected with something more than fluff. It was a real human being and I felt him and it was so fucking good, but you want to turn it into some morbid fucking crime!'

The silence that follows is satisfying.

An outburst that strong will have surged through the sentido común. Sure enough, it only takes a few seconds before our crystalpods start pinging with frantic messages. 'Can I not lose my temper in peace for once?' I curse under my breath.

'In fairness,' says Mamá, sounding unnervingly like she's enjoying herself, 'you don't often lose your own temper. You lose your sister's more than she does.'

A giggle escapes from Leonor, which she tries to conceal, but laughter sizzles through my chest, diffusing the tension in my stomach and diluting the heat in my blood.

Mamá's crystalpod keeps beeping furiously. 'Poderes, these people need to learn boundaries,' she says.

Leonor leans over to me. 'When you screamed just there, I got a really bright image of your memory,' she says.

'Bright is an understatement,' mutters Mamá while she starts typing.

'It looks beautiful.' Leonor says the word with forced sincerity. 'I'm glad it felt so connective for you. And, poderes, you and I avoid deep conexiones outside the family. But there is definitely seersage in you. It must have come from him. He used you for some sick purpose. I'm sorry a sedado—'

'Conocido,' I correct.

'Ansimano?'

Mamá nods, her eyes again unfocused. Why was I born into the one community that pries open my soul for everyone to see? 'Yes, this looks like ansimanistad.' More messages ping through the ensuing pause. Mamá's ánimo is spinning in the way it does when she's calculating. 'Our people are cursed by our passivity,' she says eventually. 'All other Potents can bend and shape space, elements and people to their will. We have always been the receivers. We imbibe from the world what's hidden to everyone else, and then they come to us to have it revealed back to them. Our passivity … both blessing and … curse and curse the guilt deep within the hurt so

heavy it drags pulls swallows calls miguel miguel mijo mamá he's lost it seersage fucking no pain the pain calls

out

to

me must push it

down bury it Miguel Miguel

Miguel

can't control can't get a grip must bury this so much pain why can't I run this this place this I am myself

but

not myself

sofa molten lights floating above

flickering shadows across my chest

slick thumping beat technolyre

club pique

miranda flicks her hair haughtily as she always does while she vizzes up what she must cog is her retinue she's only leaning against me so we glimmer a could be couple no affection maybe attraction but no real feeling the pretence is the point I sigh into the rhythm of the technolyre flourish a tumbler towards me filling it with a stream usually I'd glide it over glamourly but tonight I just let it collapse up onto the table I'm tempted to pull the liquid out in a single globule and let it flow straightly into my mouth but that would be gauche max manic maman n'approuverait pas and not the point of this whole glamourshow moving too fast the thing the core the root it's still tears it's there it's—

I collapse out, out of the trance, out of the ánimo. Floor vaults to my face. I push, kick, amble, collapse again, gain ground. My head hits something soft. Then my shoulder finds something. The room is floating.

The room is … it's doing *what*?

'Miguel?'

'What?' I ask, but my balance is off, it's …

In front of my cowering sister and intrigued mother, both of whom have their backs against a wall, the contents of the dining room are flying, as if time were suspended the moment a

whirlwind had whipped through. Plates near the ceiling, the table flipped sideways near the lounge, a chair looming suspiciously close to my head, cutlery suspended everywhere, liquid and noodle ribboning around, in the actual air.

'Miguel. You're levitating,' says Leonor.

I look down. My feet are a good half metre away from the floor. 'Santa poderes fucking hell!'

As if in response, the whole floating menagerie suddenly drops, a clatter and shatter of porcelain, metal, wood and glass. I manage to find my feet as I too de-flight. I'm too afraid to move now.

'I'm assuming Taye Velox inherited his mother's magiary?' Leonor says after a few moments of mutual shock.

'Evidently,' is all Mamá says.

'Can seersage cause magiaries to be channelled across the City?'

Leonor and I look to Mamá. 'I've never heard of it. Telepotential bridges are rare. You zoned out a whole minute.'

Zoned out? I felt like I *was* Taye Velox. In a club – the Club Pique. With a woman I remember vaguely from somewhere. Who I – I mean, who Taye doesn't like. I know exactly where Taye Velox is right now. He's

> still in the club pique gulping whiskey I'm glowering at the ease of the kinetics and pyrrhics at nearby tables the glamourshow their abandon giggles cheers at max vapid comments flimsy pyrotechnics the glamourshow of a—

I glance at Mamá just in time to see her eyes widen. Damn.

'No,' she says, 'we've messed around with this for long enough.'

'We?' I ask.

'Were you in a thoughtstream?' asks Leonor, her tone lifting into an accusation.

I can only stare back. 'How were you in a thoughtstream?' she asks. 'Your magiary isn't near the Cogniscient band!'

My stomach and chest are starting to rumble with anger. It's probably Leonor's and Mamá's combined. Or maybe it's my own. Or Taye Velox's. At this point, I don't know what I'm feeling who I'm feeling why any of this has to be happening to me because

> I just want to escape be alone for a single fucklet of a moment this club is supposed to be relaxing refuge a hive of fakery max glamourshow social transaction I viz maman's coterie she's wafting around politicos and

bureaucrats offering the gift of a moment's attention granted with a strategically placed hand on a shoulder carefully constructed laugh too easeful too absorbed but I wit I wit she's vizzing at me checking her choice is cohering the monster—

'For the love of the *fucking* Magon!' I scream. I'm on my haunches, clutching my head. The sentido común grumbles. I've probably just blasted half of the Barrio.

I need to get out of here. I'm running off energy now. Whoever's rage has been foaming inside me doesn't matter. I lean into the feeling and shut off the thinking. Mamá and Leonor can't pick anything up then. It might as well be a foreign language to their magiaries.

I want to storm off, but there's too much debris on the floor. So, with little dignity and plenty of ire-fuelled shoving and slamming, I push past Mamá and Leonor, break into a run and nearly rip the front door open. I'm almost to the staircase when neighbours' voices start chorusing.

'Miguel, what happened?'

'Who was that?'

'Who just woke me up with that rude blast? Like a siren!'

'It was Miguel! Where's he going now?'

I run right through the lobby, nearly colliding into Señor Pensado and Isabel, who calls after me, 'Don't forget the campaign event! Miguel?'

Hech her puny politics. Hech the whole lot of them. And hech fucking Taye Velox. He doesn't get to ruin my life.

Still at a decent run along the pavement, I charter a flycab from my crystalpod. I can't really afford it, but fuck it. I'm going to Club Pique. I may be fuming off of Mamá and Leonor's anger or Taye's or my own oh-so-bottled-up-but-now-it's-exploding indignation. I'll channel it. Give this mach a piece of my mind.

Chapter 4

The flycab travels fluidly through the thinning traffic. Usually, I'd find the luxury of a chartered flycab something to savour, but I'm in a fog. Until a few minutes ago, it was bubbling, frothing, magmatic rage. Now it's just propulsive bitterness. The City at night sparkles in neon and flycraft headlights, the light of which reflects off the glass shell of the vehicle. The world shouldn't be so calm.

I feel the psychology of the Upperburb Loftry neighbourhood imposing itself on me as the flycab ascends and the streetlevels become cleaner, the facades newer and the flycars swisher. The architecture is more capacious. The brickwork glistens. Residents aren't crowding apartment-block entryways. It feels cold, icy, almost absorbing the energy from my ire.

The flycab leaves me before a staircase that rises to an opulent brass door. The venue's name rests demurely on a small plaque on the right, almost invisible in the twilight.

I haven't planned how I'm going to get inside. Logic wasn't exactly the impetus. There is no throng or even a bouncer to guard the establishment from infiltration by Potents of lesser magiaries. This, though, is a door – closed, yes, but just a door – atop a staircase, with no one else nearby. I guess entry is obtained through some inside knowledge. It's almost charming.

I'm apprehensive now. Great. I'd been counting on fury to push me inside to a cathartic confrontation. It seemed so energising, so purposeful.

But the door whooshes open with a cluster of gloriously drunk Upperburbers, who roar to the night in posh languor. I take the chance to slip in, hoping no Guard are inside.

There aren't. The world here is dislocating to my Midburb sensibilities and the fury I'm supposed to be carrying. I haven't been anywhere like this. The lobby is dimly lit, but gold and brass flourishes glint off wooden panelling. The floor is dark marble, as is another ridiculously wide staircase leading, presumably, into the club proper. A twangy technolyre rhythm of a popular song I recognise pumps and seethes from within. Balls of fire are levitating near the high ceiling, with wisps of flame curling towards the next set of doors at the interior staircase's landing.

A few people – Kinetics, judging by the frost-pale skin and chains hovering around their necks in slow liquid swirls – are leaning against the railings or in shadowed corners. A sinewy woman steps down to the floor as I enter. She gives me a brief look of serene surprise. I don't

know if it's my casual attire or non-Kinetic features that startles her, but she recovers quickly and glides past.

What I do sense is something atmospheric, like the sentido común but much fainter. The psyches in this venue are similar and there is a strand, almost a vibration in the air itself. The closest I can get to naming it is hauteur.

And I'm glad to feel just enough anger still gripping my stomach. This is Taye's domain. Concentrated Upperburbers. And he's … he's here. I sense his ánimo. The connection is still pulsing.

I make my way up the interior staircase, trying to look as comfortable as possible. The next doorway is another brass door. It simply opens, of its own accord. Inside, Club Pique is a reverie of refinement. I don't know what I was expecting exactly, but I think my instincts would have predicted a seedy, heady, smoke-filled chamber, with bodies in a cloud of magial narcotics. Instead, I'm on the mezzanine of a glossy, mostly fire-lit hall. Beyond a gold-embossed banister is an open space in which a dozen people are floating in a mesmeric dance. Tendrils of blue flame swirl between the bodies and blossom at points into plasma plumes. An artist is somehow managing to sing and play on a dozen crystalslabs while suspended midair in the midst of the choreography. No one seems to be paying her much attention. The club's clientele are wafting between sofas, flying benches around levitating fireballs and a bar that appears to be operating by kinetickry. There are bubbles of polite laughter, clusters of hushed and intense conversations, hands on shoulders, arms around waists, most people seemingly always moving. Most here appear Kinetic. All look like the kind of people who might drug a Sensorial for laughs. There are Pyrrhics around too, of course: they tend to have appropriately reddish tinges to their hair, often with streaks that smoulder like embers about to extinguish. The younger Pyrrhics are sporting vibrantly flickering flames on their fringes, which seems to be the fashion among them this year. You have to look closer to distinguish the Romanesque features of the Quantics. The light arcing and rippling around too perfect, too chiselled faces that shift like mirages suggests Luminents are around too.

I can't see Taye but I can feel him. I can feel a *lot* of people, but his ánimo is piquant. He's … to the right.

I walk briskly now, homing in. Soon I can get closure. He'll get a piece of my mind, the mind he's fucked with.

There.

Taye Velox. Wearing black, with a single but obscenely chunky, diamond-studded rope spinning an inch above his neckline. Easeful in his indifference. Next to him are a rather bellicose-looking Pyrrhic with glowing flecks peppering his beard, and an ethereal Kinetic in an absurdly flattering dress. Miranda.

Line of sight pumps the connection my body easing again into Taye's ánimo feeling irritated bored his mind close emotion steady I need to I need to maintain some control or I'll pass out …

I take advantage of a tray floating by me with a few tumblers of a red-gold liquid. I grab one, take a generous gulp and stride towards the trio with as much swagger as I can muster.

From only a few feet away, I can hear the conversation – or monologue, to be more accurate. I feel them too.

'It was so typical of Janet,' Miranda is cooing. She has the thickest Hightongue accent I've heard in a while – virtually motionless lips and vowels so stretched they're close to snapping. 'These low-powered virs, they just don't dosh it, you wit? Janet cogs she can just clash up and dazz him over with her fucklet min kinetickry. The sor can hardly lift a leaf. Nil, we don't need her sloshing after Charles.'

'Nil, not Charles!' I declare as I insert myself deftly into the clique. 'Miranda, nil, nil, nil. Janet shouldn't be anywhere *near* Charles.'

I sip with verve. That was glorious Hightongue. Their astonishment buoys my nerves. My body is a mire of sense, trying desperately to keep the feelingstream from causing an overcharge.

Miranda is looking at me as if I were a pile of manure dumped theatrically on her dress. The Pyrrhic's beard is glowing hotter. I've seen him before, and Miranda too. Back in the Service. Two years ago.

Taye – well, for a moment, he's suddenly playing with one of his cuffs. Then, as if a switch has flipped, he straightens, smiles that benevolent, meaningless smile and holds court. 'Miranda,' he says, 'You must rewit Miguel?'

Miranda lets slip a sharp, and poorly retrained, snicker. 'No, Te,' she says, distorting Taye's name in a way that sparks a flicker of irritation, which must be from him. 'We haven't junxed fore.' Her eyes slip over my hair and face. 'Sentient, Cogniscient or Clairvoyant?'

'Sentient,' I reply with some surprise at her accurate assumption of my synod.

'We don't viz many of your gen round these parts?' Her intonation rises to coax the line ungrammatically into a question.

‘You viz, Miranda,’ I say, giving my nearly empty glass a flourish in the manner of the people nearby, ‘we Sentient Sensorials find Upperburb parties quite the roar up. It’s intoxicating in here. So much emotion to feed on.’

The Pyrrhic grunts out a puff of steam.

‘And how do ye virs ken each other so firm, Te?’ Centuries of subtle social differentiation hang on her tone, no matter how much sugar she infuses into it.

‘We were all in the Service juxt. Don’t ye rewit?’ asks Taye, dismissing the conversation by gesturing towards one of the floating trays. A bottle of something with a French label flies forward, tilts and refills his glass.

‘In Johannesburg? I don’t rewit you,’ the Pyrrhic finally interjects a no no shoot it down the can’t why now

this

stupid

stupid

Taye’s heart is pounding or mine or both or why can’t I concentrate this looming seething panic here in the—

Focus!

I turn my dizziness into a pensive look. ‘I was around Midburbers the max time,’ I say. ‘Ye merged around with the other Upperburbers, verit?’ Looming surge down deep

pulling

pulling

call—

‘Bono,’ Miranda flutters, ‘I didn’t come here tonight to dict about the Service.’ I wonder if she feels the slightest discomfort at not remembering a Midburber being stuck on a Service base with her for a year.

‘Verit, did ye ever smuggle seersage between yourselves back then?’

I almost choke from the shiver of anxiety that snaps snaps snaps—

Miranda tilts her head like a lizard.

I continue, ‘I always heard seersage trades sliply through our Service bases.’

‘Miranda,’ Taye says, ‘it’s been firm vizzing you. Magnus.’ He nods to the Pyrrhic.

‘Ping me up,’ Miranda says with only marginally disguised flirtation.

Taye grabs my arm the sudden physical contact triggers ferocious jolt unrestrained ánimo fully collapse panic the heat the fear panic so hard keep it down keep it

keep

it

down

Nerves skin numbs muscles tense for escape Taye guiding mezzanine holding only lightly but enough my magiary overdrive greet people charisma dripping from his voice my voice his voice yes

Miguel fratelle

forced chuckle

smile glimmer them glimmer

what is this vir's problem why is he even here

I tumble out of his ánimo when he releases me.

We're on a patio. Only a few people are out here, many of them smoking some kind of sage around generous fireballs. The City stretches beneath the railing. The soft blue glow of the Bubble is visible just off the shoreline. These Upperburbers are so high they get to see the City as the tiny island it is.

'How did you obb in here?' His chummy tone is slipping. 'Not that Sensorials never obb up here, and not that I have a problem with anyone from any synod in our zone, and not that your Hightongue isn't half convincing, but—'

'Scapesage.'

He manhandles me (I almost pass pass out) right up to the edge. 'Fra, can we not use that word so loudly. And veritly, *how* did you obb in here? You have to use an Upperburb magiary on the door to unlock it.'

'The door opened.'

He squints. His necklace is spinning more quickly, undulating randomly. His ánimo is trembling near me again. 'And you're here for the company and the cognac?'

'I'm here because you fucking drugged me. It's like having an entire emotional consciousness dumped into my body. And I haven't mentioned the Kinetic channelling.'

'Is that a formal accusation, counsel?'

I'm sufficiently compelled by rage now, supplemented by the rising anger in Taye. 'I know you live in a heching glass castle or something—'

'It's a small apartment—'

‘—but this kind of thing is wrong. You can’t just play with Sensorials’ magiaries for some sick phant. You Kinetics are so hechbent on bending everyone telekinetically to your will. Do you ever stop to think what it does to us?’

‘Miguel, I—’

‘Is there a Kinetic alive who ever faces consequences for their actions?’

‘Fair.’

That stalls my rant, as does the very obvious confusion I’m sensing. ‘You – fuck it, you’re telling the truth.’

‘Bono, then, why would you cog I would do *that*?’

‘Do you mind not being so calm?’ I say. ‘It’s distracting.’

‘My calm is distracting?’

‘There’s a magial connection between us. This isn’t my normal sentience. Usually, when I meet someone I hardly know, like you, I can sense fuzzy shots of your emotions, more if I’m touching you. It’s inexact. This is something else. Seersage is involved. How else do you think I “obbed” in here, to use your heching Hightongue term?’

‘You said the door opened.’

‘Your magiary opened it, Taye. Channelled through me.’

His frame evokes cavalierness, but an icy fear has started to vibrate so strongly I have to grab the railing for support. He leans towards me and, the charm still glittering, murmurs rapidly, ‘I can give you money. Name a price.’

‘What? I don’t want your money!’

‘Any price, I mean it. I’ll give you whatever you want. We can keep this between us.’

‘This being what? That you’re in possession of magial contraband or that you spike helpless Sensorials with it?’ I ask.

‘You didn’t obb a drop of seersage from me, cred me.’

‘All I want is for you not to drug people, especially Sensorials. Do you know what seersage does to us? It’s given to cognigraphers and only then in the tiniest controlled doses with medical supervision, because otherwise it sends our magiaries into such overdrive that our bodies shut down. And stop thinking about throwing me over the ledge.’

He backs away rapidly, his hands raised in surrender. ‘I wasn’t cogging to throw you over. Exactly.’

‘It was a feeling, not a thought.’

He re-approaches tentatively. Once he's within a few inches, he mutters, 'Everyone has a price.'

His desperation is propelling me to agree, but I think against the current. 'Do you drug random people or is it a targeted practice, some game you play?'

His ánimo tilts towards something ungraspable. 'Stay right here,' he says. 'Or I'll make you stay.'

'Your threat would be scary if you weren't so terrified right now.'

He gives me a look I can't parse. 'Veritly, vir, there are people in this room who could slay up either of us with a glance. Stay *right* here.' He resumes his suave demeanour and darts back inside.

Distance diffuses the feelingstream that my body has been trying to find the sinews and nerves to embody, and thought to encompass. I can't deny, though, that I'm starting to recognise the shape of his ánimo, giving form to the stream and scatter. I'm not sure that's a positive turn.

Without an Upperburber beside me, I stick out. A couple of elderly Pyrrhic women are eyeing me from across the patio. They're literally smoking sage: each has a bundle of the magial herb roasting above flame-tipped fingers. I assume it isn't the illegal variety, but one can't be certain in this place. I can't sense them from this distance but I'd bet they think I'm about to rob someone. There's applause from within the club, though not at the technolyre performer. I can see the crowd shuffling towards something, some Kinetics levitating a few feet so they can see.

'Better glimmer up to the old purr,' one of the sage-smoking ladies says to her companion in a tense Hightongue accent, giving me a warning shot as they go inside.

An 'Ooh!' grumbles through the crowd just as Taye returns, clutching something in his right fist. Only when he's within a foot of me does he open it to reveal a small black velvet bag. Inside is a bottle with a familiar brand label, a vile with a green-blue liquid – and a syringe.

'Is that – what the fuck, Velox!'

'Do you want it or not?' he hisses.

'The expensive inhibidor or the *liquid seersage*?'

'Obviously the inhibidor.' He's still smiling like this is some kind of schmoozy social call. But I can sense his panic. And that pain. It's there. Deep, deep down.

'We have plenty of inhibidor at home,' I tell him. 'Why do you have liquid seersage and a syringe?'

'Why do you cog?'

'Are you injecting people directly?

He ties the bag shut. ‘That would be max befucked.’

‘That stuff is meant to be smoked. Very slowly. In tiny doses. And very diluted!’

‘Again,’ he says, ‘cred me, fra. If you have seersage in you, you didn’t obb it from me.’

‘But you thought showing me you’re in illegal possession of a controlled substance would absolve you? You Upperburbers live different lives.’

‘I cogged you could use the inhibidor. Forgive me.’ He pockets the bag and turns away from me in the first unhidden sign of irritation he’s allowed himself to show.

Then he turns back slowly and rubs his hands. His necklace is spinning so fast it’s becoming a blur. He’s staring at me with a look of pure pleading, but I can see that he’s trying hard to retain his composure. Darkness is flickering at the edges of my senses.

‘Bono, I didn’t,’ he begins, but his voice falters. He’s surprised by this. ‘I did not drug you.’ He averts his eyes to the skyline behind me. There’s a bit of a shuffle going on by the door.

‘Taye?’

He looks at me, daring me not to go further. ‘Can’t you just mindread it from me?’

‘I’m Sentient, not Cogniscient.’

‘You really should voy out, Miguel,’ he says. He turns again to leave, but he’s halted by a coterie of black-suited Kinetics with ridiculously gaudy, shimmering, hovering necklaces who have emerged onto the patio. At their centre is a frighteningly austere woman in an ink-dark, high-necked gown that ripples – literally in motion – behind her in a train, as if caught in slow-motion wind. Her necklace is thinner than Taye’s, but far more intricate, with globules of diamonds twirling an inch off her neck and gold oozing liquidly around and between the rocks, making tiny patterns of folding metallic strands. Her face is stately, vain, cruel, beautiful. Her outfit, her regalia and her retinue signal her as the apex of Kinetic society, its caste personified, but even so, she is phenomenally out of place. Never has a Kinetic Master looked like her – dark skin so utterly un-Kinetic, the pale staff behind her an inversion that only she could orchestrate in her rise. Taye’s resemblance to her is vibrant, even if he could claim a closer connection to Club Pique’s world than she did at birth. But she attained the Kinetic Mastery, stunningly and emphatically.

She approaches, leaving the others at the door so they can restrain the partygoers from snooping on this familial rendezvous. I’m awed by her presence, and mortified that she is looking directly at me.

‘Your Magnificence,’ I stumble and execute the best impromptu bow I can manage.

When my head rises, I notice that Taye has bowed too. *That* is unexpected.

‘Votre Magnificence, Maîtresse Bien-Aimée, je vous sers,’ he intones, in apparently fluid French. Again, unexpected. His discomfort is both visible in his mien (so quickly shattered by the arrival of his mother), and circling my chest.

As for Her Magnificence, I can’t sense a thing from her. She’s close enough that I should at least catch a general emotive state, just one sentimiento, but it’s as if she weren’t here at all. She must have some kind of scrubber to block her. It would make sense: this woman is one of the most powerful Potents alive. She raises an eyebrow to Taye.

‘Uh, Maman, this is Miguel Vidente. Miguel, Her Magnificence Plenipotentiary Niobe Velox, Master of the Kinetic Synod.’

I half expect to kiss her hand, but she keeps her arms folded in front of her. ‘Vidente?’ she asks in that rousing alto I’ve heard so often from Subcouncil footage. Her pronunciation is spookily accurate, giving the D the dental ‘th’ and wrapping her tongue against her teeth for the T, almost natively Sensorial. ‘You must be related to Professor Patricia Vidente. A thorn, but a good Progressive voice. ¿Tiene usted la orilla, Señor Vidente?’ It’s been a while since I’ve heard cogniscience so described, and certainly in such rapid Spanish.

‘La sensación, Vuestra Magnificencia,’ I reply using the historic term for my magiary. It feels weird using the Spanish honorific to address another synod’s Master.

‘I invited him,’ Taye mumbles. ‘We served together.’

Her Magnificence nods. ‘I hope your synod gives us a few Progressives in the Subcouncil elections.’ She gives Taye a smile. ‘Parle à Miranda,’ she says before she glides back inside, her train (both of fabric and people) floating in her wake.

Sadness is pulling at me, and some ferocity too, mixed with quivering affection. Taye and Plenipotentiary Velox must have quite the relationship. Taye is staring at me. I don’t need to sense his thoughts to know what he’s wondering. When it’s clear he won’t break the silence, I tell him, ‘It’s not an exact science. But, broadly, yes, I sensed how you felt just there.’

His jaw twitches. His feelings are lilting towards something new. My body locates it in my gut, then constricts my throat and rattles my heart rate.

‘The syringe is for you, isn’t it?’ I probe. ‘You’ve been injecting seersage.’ Anger broils. ‘This morning, had you just taken a hit?’ Now he laughs, a nervous spasm of his lungs. ‘It makes sense now. When you touched my arm, I sensed you through the seersage in your blood. It must have amplified the connection. And fucked with my brain.’

‘Cred me, it doesn’t linger long,’ he says darkly. He lifts a finger and my crystalpod flies straight out of my trouser pocket into his hand. Before I can protest, his own crystalpod levitates from his jacket, tips to mine and makes a tap at the corner.

‘I said I don’t want your money,’ I say.

‘Bono, now it’s a completed transaction,’ he says. ‘An agreement forged in payment.’

‘Is this how you solve all your problems?’

‘I’ve acknowledged my mistake. This isn’t a solution, just compensation.’

‘Just hope I can’t channel your kinetickry for much longer.’

He straightens and smiles genially. With a politician’s ease with avoiding a direct question, he nods and walks away.

I’m not sure if my intentions in coming here have been fulfilled, or if knowing I sensed a drug-addled ánimo is soothing. As I cross the patio, past the hovering fires and floating alcohol on-demand, I almost miss the quirks of the Barrio.

Chapter 5

I'm nearly at the doorway when I notice Taye at a table on the other side of the veranda. I expected him to go in to entertain Miranda, which I'm sure his mother had intimated he do. Instead, he's sitting alone, with his face in his hands. Good. He deserves some contrition. His recklessness has put people like me in danger.

So why, then, do I feel pity for him?

There's nothing to pull me to him. And yet, I pity this illustrious son in the shadow of the rising star, reduced to a hunch on a table on the far edge of the most exclusive club on the Magial Isle. There was that darkness, that deep, toxic pain that has lurked in me when I've sensed him.

I curse to myself. I conjure a dozen reasons to turn around, take the money he's given me (the amount of which I still need to check, come to think of it) and enjoy the chartered flycab home I can now afford.

But I go. I go to him.

He doesn't notice until I'm standing right in front of his table. 'Maledict,' he moans. 'Is it not enough money?'

'Take this from a Sensorial, and a Sentient at that,' I say, keeping my voice low. 'Seersage is shit. It doesn't enlighten you or open up neural pathways. It's a magium-boosted hallucination spree – that's it. It can't solve a suffering mind. You are a man in pain, Taye. I've felt it. Directly.'

He's covering his mouth with his propped-up fists, so I only see his eyes. What I'm saying is prodding at uncomfortable wounds. His pain is surfacing.

'I appreciate you might not want to go to a Sensorial psychologist—'

'Fucking verit!' he hisses.

'—but you need help.' I lean closer, knowing the next point might do him in, but I need to say it. 'This morning, when we shook hands, I got this sudden, mammoth blast of your ánimo. It was so clear. Boosted by the seersage, clearly. Why do you think the only thing I felt I should do was reach for you and … and hug you?'

He glowers, but internally there's something breaking. Still, he says nothing, but his eyes are fixed on me. Eventually, and with finality, he whispers, 'Please voy out, Miguel.' I nod slowly, and leave him with an attempt at a sympathetic smile.

A scraping sound halts me.

The chair opposite him has slid away from the table. Taye sees it, and shuts his eyes. Again, the chair shifts a few more inches. Taye's eyes are still closed, but he's grimacing. 'You didn't mean for that to happen, did you?' He pounds his forehead with his knuckles. Walking back to him slowly, I ask, 'Your magiary can work subconsciously?' The sound of snapping glass thwacks across the patio, followed by shouts. A Pyrrhic's cognac snifter seems to have exploded in her hand. 'I knew Kinetics could be dangerous, but fuck!'

Though closed, his eyelids are moistening. I am witness, I know, to a crack in his persona, a glitch.

We remain in this stasis for what feels like a whole minute, neither of us speaking or even acknowledging the precarity of the moment. His ánimo fills the silence with distracting amplitude.

Without any other movement, he finally opens his eyes. He holds my gaze, not speaking, not needing to speak, leaning into my knowing, into the relief that someone sees him, really sees him, feels him even.

When it's clear that Taye won't do anything other than stare, I sit in the chair his mind has pushed out for me. I feel as if I need to reach across, to connect, to grasp. I wonder if he has the impulse too. He's biting into his clasped fists, watching, immobilised by the sudden insufficiency of his mask.

'I'm tame,' I say with a forced chuckle.

He attempts to snort, but it comes out as a sharp sob. 'What do I dict – I mean, what do I *say* to someone who apparently knows me better than I know myself?' Midtongue flows through his mouth like silk over glass. It's extraordinary in its dissonance with his dress, with this club.

'That's not how my magiary works.'

'I believe the way you phrased it was "like having an entire emotional consciousness dumped into my body". I'm not well acquainted with my emotional consciousness. So, you know me better than I know myself.'

'Everything I feel, even magially, is filtered through my own framework. My biases can easily skew my interpretations.'

'I know the mechanics,' he says. 'You're giving me the school-level definition of your magiary.'

'You're running away from something.'

His necklace freezes. 'Why did you sit down?' he asks with a sharper tone than before.

I'm stumped for a moment by the confrontational turn. 'Honestly, I don't know.'

'Lie,' he breathes.

'Is this how you handle all your interactions? One part of you pulls people closer, only for the other part to push them immediately away?'

'I'm just trying to work out what you think you're going to accomplish by sitting down at a table with me.' His accent is broadening and with each word. Did his mother teach Midtongue to him? 'You're a Sensorial in a club full of people who think your kind doesn't deserve to be here.'

'You said you didn't have a problem with Sensorials being here.'

'But *you* have a hech of a problem being around us Kinetics, right? Around any Upperburbers.' His necklace resumes its spin. His anger is subsiding, his sense of control increasing.

'I don't have a problem being around Upperburbers.'

'I don't have to be Sentient to read the judgement in your eyes. Why did you sit down? We aren't going to be friends. Or do you even do friendships? Don't you have hundreds of relationship forms to choose from? The men liked to go to your dorm a lot in the Service, if I recall correctly.'

Finally moving, Taye leans back, now triumphantly calm, folds his arms and looks to the side. The sense of impending pain is fading. He slips back into Hightongue. 'Don't miscog, Vidente,' he says. 'This is standard for me.' With icy precision, he has deployed language and posture to prick me.

'I didn't sit down to flirt with you,' I say.

His head flicks back. 'So, you're dicting you don't cog me attractive?' he asks almost ferociously.

'Not right now I don't.'

'Ah, so you *did*.'

I'm too destabilised by his interrogation to trust anything I'm feeling or sensing right now. 'Back in the Service, you were the dashing Kinetic prince.'

'Gleamly.'

'You were clearly very interested in the Kinetic women around you. '

'Gleamly.'

'You were unattainable.'

'Gleamly.'

‘And you’re Kinetic. You maches don’t understand our ways of loving.’

‘Why,’ he says, leaning forward, ‘did you sit down, then? What do you want?’

Abruptly, he slumps back and, with an impatient wave, summons a bottle, which lands with a clammer between us. Two tumblers follow, nearly breaking against the table. Then, contrasting his sloppy kinetickry, he carefully pours a glass for each of us by hand. His demeanour has switched again. This man lives in shades and shimmers.

‘You’re lashing out on the surface, but I sense what’s behind it,’ I tell him.

His ánimo pivots; defences rearrange. He flies the inhibidor out of his pocket and pours straight into the glasses. ‘You shouldn’t mix inhibidor and alcohol,’ I say.

He hovers the glass he poured for me towards my chest. ‘I’m still alive.’

‘And inhibidor isn’t an antidote to seersage. Nor does it really work on non-Sensorials.’

‘Don’t dict me taking a sip will make you a collaborator with Upperburb colonisers?’ he croons.

‘Does psychoanalysing a Sentient make you feel like you’re levelling the playing field in this conversation? Or does it just distance you from the truth?’

He swallows his glass in a single shot. He spins it, manually, for a long time, watching the firelight glitter through the patterns.

Suddenly, he slams the glass on the table and hisses, ‘I’m not accustomed to being *seen.*’ He meets my eyes for only a second.

For the first time today, I think he’s being fully, radically honest.

‘I mean, I’m vizzed all the time, gleamly,’ he adds, pinching his nose. He’s trying to steady the quiver emerging in his voice. ‘Every vir and sor here wits who I am. Or they wit who my mother is. Even in other synods, people wit my surname, viz how I look.’ He shows me the back of his hand. ‘So, yes, I’m vizzed all the time. But, seen?’ He shrugs, absorbed by the light playing on the glass.

‘I guess Kinetic culture is more about appearances than it is for us Sensorials,’ I say.

‘That’s a lazy stereotype.’ He floats my glass right up to my lips now as the moment of vulnerability collapses back into banter. ‘Voy on, Vidente. You obbed into one of the most socially barricaded institutions on the Isle, merged around with the Society’s power brokers, dicted down on *the* Miranda Lightly – which, by the way, was max superious omnifuckery – and met my lovely mother. Taste the poison!’

I relent. It tastes like activated sand.

‘You said it’s a lazy stereotype,’ I say after pushing the floating glass to the table. ‘How is Kinetic life not about appearances? This club is visual proof of it. Those necklaces aren’t subtle.’

‘There’s nuance to it, my vir,’ he says. ‘Is the connection still – you wit?’

‘Clear as that glass.’

‘So, you wit everybit about me?’

‘No, that’s not how it works,’ I say. ‘The feelings hit me. I then have to interpret what I feel. And I have my own feelings to sort through at the same time. Your ánimo is different to what I’m used to in my synod. It’s deeper, darker, more inhibited.’

‘You dicted I was running from something,’ he says, not looking at me. He opens his mouth to speak, but his throat catches. His nerves quaver between us. Again, he tries to speak, managing no more than fumbling his lips. I thought I was in control again but the panic is close the gloom closer right under just there just so close seizing grasping yanking down down threatening to overwhelm close

too close

too close to

run

running always running

I ooze back to my senses. My body is still here, rigid. Still wrapped in the emotionalia, the feelingstream blazing.

Taye hasn’t moved either.

My voice is hoarse when I speak. ‘Your feelings are intense. Fra.’ At the use of the Hightongue term of affection, a little strand of glee sparks between us. ‘The reason I sat down is just because I felt like I needed to reach out to you. What I sensed just demanded that. That’s all. Maybe that’s too Sensorial. We like to respond to what we see people crave.’

Taye replies in barely more than a whisper, his voice wobbling through the rawness in his throat, ‘You vizzed into my soul and your response – your befucked, maledictive response – is to *reach out*?’

I nod. He catches my eyes for an instant, but diverts. ‘Do people in your life never reach out to you?’

He’s staring into the distance now. ‘Not without expecting somebit in return, no. Alwise strategic. What is it like in your synod? Do people always wit to reach out? Must be superious.’

‘It’s messier than you think. There is such a thing as being too seen. And too known.’

‘You do realise I’m not attracted to men, not like you?’ His tone is flat, which I believe is his most honest expressive mode. It’s so unlike the carefully crafted intonations of his charismatic speech. This is Taye Velox stripped of bombast and charm. He finally looks at me again. ‘I’m not just dicting that because I’m Kinetic.’ When I laugh, he scowls. ‘What? What other stereotypes do ye have of us?’

‘I’m not saying that in this club!’ He gives me a droll look. ‘Well, we think pretty much every other synod is bland and binary. Always fucking or friendship. You fuck your opposite sex and befriend your own. We call that bland and binary.’

He’s smiling confusedly. ‘What else could there possibly be?’

‘Humans connect for many reasons, Taye,’ I say. ‘You don’t have to test me for ulterior motivates. Sometimes it’s enough simply to *be*.’

‘It must be bono to merge around the world always witting who you can cred,’ he says.

‘I can be fooled.’

‘Do you huff up if we … like …’ He gestures as if to fill the verbal gap. I can sense him squirming at the gushiness.

‘Spend time together? “Hang out” as the Impotents say?’

‘Yeah, that. Would that … do you … we don’t ken each other. We live in max different worlds. I …’

‘Yes, Taye. We can “hang out” sometime.’

Something warm fizzes between us for a moment. ‘You wit the Hightongue term for it?’

‘Bond around?’ I say.

He laughs, a good, guttural release. ‘Your Hightongue is exterious, fra. We’ll bond around, yes. I’ll bond around with a Sentient Sensorial.’ He shakes his head at me in disbelief, looks down. ‘Dicting is good. Just dicting. And how do I explain it? It’s good to just …’

‘Be around someone who sees you?’

He nods and bites his bottom lip. His eyes are scrutinising my face. The sensation of trust – grounding, protective – anchors. I know that sentiment isn’t mine. Despite the humanity that has flickered to the surface, despite the vividness of his ánimo, the full Taye Velox is still unreachable; I don’t trust that I’ve sensed the full man. Yet he feels trust towards me.

‘My crystalpod frequency will be on yours,’ he says. ‘You’ll viz it with all that bullion I gave you.’

I want to protest his commodification of my kindness and his reminding me of it, but it doesn’t seem appropriate. ‘Can we please not meet here though?’

He regards the patio. ‘It isn’t designed for fun.’

‘Can I get out of here without channelling your kinetickry?’

He laughs again, that same abrupt, joyous punctuation. ‘I can obb you out. Could help me avoid Miranda.’

I make a show of tapping through my crystalpod to see the transaction. There is no need to feign my surprise at the amount. I won’t be able to hide this knowledge from the sentido común. Tomorrow morning will be heaps of fun.

Taye walks me out the club. His charm seems less vigorous in the perfunctory greetings and nods and smiles he offers Upperburbers who are keen to cross paths with him. I notice Miranda Lightly and Niobe Velox in fierce conversation in a far corner: the latter’s train is rippling into a rope-like shape near the former’s neck.

Taye chooses to wait with me while my flycab arrives. He hovers awkwardly. I don’t think he knows how to sit with familiarity like this, especially a bond that materialised over a few minutes. It’s disorienting feeling at once his dread to go back inside, his unease and comfort in my presence, and my own need to get back to the familiar, invasive drama of the Barrio.

While my flycab floats away from Club Pique, I see Taye ascending the staircase slowly, his hands in his pockets, pausing at the door to gather his strength, before inserting himself back into his gilded world.

I’ve been reckless. I see it. I wanted a sense of justice, but all I managed to do was bond a man who messed with my magiary. The feelingstreams have overwhelmed my nervous system. For a while I think I should go to Isabel’s campaign event, but it seems odd to rally for the caucus whose leader I’ve just met and whose son’s ánimo is still weaving through my frame. Instead, remembering Pensado’s reading of my pensario earlier, I go straight to Isaac’s apartment.

He detects my craving before I’m even at the door. I don’t need to articulate the sed that grips at my nerves or the messiness of transferring urges onto an available body. When he opens the door, I see his saciamañero laying shirtless on a couch. His ánimo doesn’t suggest any need of me, but something gleeful fires through Isaac’s. His eyes trace my biceps and wander across my chest, then settle at my crotch. It’s a languid glance, devoid of a ferocious thirst that would make this seem more fulfilling, but I’m too wired, too tired, too emotionally thin to care right now. ‘Something’s different about your ánimo,’ Isaac says. ‘It’s cockier. Intense.’

I allow him to sense my resignation. Bonding another Sentient is like clinging to a mirror, all looping reflections and smears over the truth. I sense his sed and let it push me inside.

Chapter 6

‘Would you like to hear the headlines from the seerscope analysts this morning?’ Mamá asks.

‘If I think only of drowning kittens, fingernails scraping on a chalkboard and the smell of sulphur, will that thoughtstream stop you from telling me?’ I reply.

Mamá doesn’t even raise an eyebrow. Nor does she ask why I’ve arrived at the apartment at six in the morning. ‘Omens emerge in latest seerscopes, warning of Upperburb infiltration on eve of election. That’s from *Hermanas Encantadas*, which they helpfully embellish with some lovely visuals.’ She is refracting the text of her crystalpod into the air as she scrolls, so I can see the headlines she reads. ‘Images of death pervade futuario común. *Colectivo de los Videntes Precisos*.’

‘A group that calls itself *precise*? Comforting.’

‘Even the usually sensible *Journal of Sensorial Divinology*—’

‘—of which you’re an editor. Ah, there’s a photo of you—’

‘Lexical and metaphorical shifts in privately published seerscopes signal turn towards fear-based interpretational paradigms and us-them polemics. It’s a gripping read,’ she says.

I’ve barely managed to open the door before confronting the familial interrogation. My mother and sister claim they were asleep when I arrived in the Barrio last night, but I know they were trying to eavesdrop on my pensario.

I move past Mamá and Leonor and make a show of materialising wakesage from the kitchen crystalslab. ‘The tabloids are loving it,’ says Mamá. ‘Señora Recibiz is in on the action as always. Her members-only scope says there’s a “secret, smutty lascivanistad between a Barrio playboy and an heir of the top streetlevel”.’

I glug brew and think of puppies.

‘Your dreams were leaky last night,’ says Leonor.

‘Oh, do share, Leonor,’ I sigh. ‘Also, do share how you read my dreams while I was nowhere near this apartment.’

‘Isaac, right?’ She grins. ‘Finally.’

Mamá nods rapidly. ‘The sed between you two has been distracting.’

‘Your dreams had nothing to do with Isaac, though,’ says Leonor. ‘Makes sense. He’s a good choice for a saciado, don’t get me wrong, but your dreams were more erratic. I saw a lot of

running. I wasn't sure if you were running away from something or towards it. But you were running. Or someone else was running. Your pensario was running.'

'You know, in other synods, people's families don't give them verbatim accounts of their dreams and plunder their pensarios for details of their bonding.' I swipe at the crystalslab for an extra shot of wakesage. 'And Mamá, haven't the seerscopes been bleak for months now?'

She replies, without looking up from her crystalpod's text, which is now crowding the kitchen, 'Yes, which is fascinating – academically.'

'And are we now a family that takes anything the seerscopes say literally?'

'No, of course not. They're fun literary scribbles.' She gets the crystalslab to quantise a parfait and waxes lyrical while contemplating the magially printed fruit. 'Sensorial writing shaped empires once. It shaped many of the Impotents' holy texts, entire world faiths. Now it shapes gossip columns for the other synods to imbibe.'

'Are you going to eat anything, Leonor?' I ask innocently to jolt my sister from squinting at me. She maintains eye contact as she waves the crystalslab to conjure a single blueberry, which she proceeds to eat ceremoniously. I notice a ping from Isabel on my crystalpod:

Why didn't you come last night?

We need NUMBERS!

Mamá is still in flow. 'What's fascinating me about the seerscopery right now isn't *what* they're saying; it's the meta-narrative. There has been a stylistic shift.'

'Agh, for the love of poderes!' Leonor interjects. 'Is he or is he not the playboy from Señora Recibiz's seerscope? She already said he was yesterday's subject.'

I mutter to my mug, 'I thought you were a professional cognigrapher.'

'Miguel's the reason the seerscopes have shifted this morning, isn't he?'

Mamá shakes her head slowly. 'You were safe last night, right, mijo?' Leonor looks like she wants to intervene, but Mamá's eye twitches a telepathic shush.

I take a deep breath. I need to keep my thoughts steady as I speak or they'll pounce on something subconscious. 'I don't seem to be channelling his kinetickry anymore,' I tell them. When they respond with narrow eyes, I add, 'I spoke to Taye Velox. I got his story, which includes that I wasn't drugged with any seersage, by the way. I also met his mother.' Mamá raises a hand to quieten Leonor's imminent swearing. 'And we might … bond around.'

'Bond around? With Plenipotentiary Niobe Velox?' Leonor blurts out. Mamá massages a piece of pineapple with the back of her spoon.

'No, Leonor. With *Taye*,' I reply. 'As his friend.'

‘A *friend* – of a Velox? Since when do you use that generic word?’

‘I have every right to choose my friends and call them friends. Especially if they don’t understand our ways. And how would I even begin to explain to a man like Taye Velox how our complicated conexiones work? I don’t even know if I do. Even with the *intense* respect I hold for you, and for Mamá of course, I can still choose who I spend time with outside this apartment, even if it’s with a Kinetic. And if I sound angry right now, it’s *your* anger I’m sensing.’

Mamá interjects, ‘That doesn’t answer how you had seersage in your pensario or how you were able to kinetically levitate the contents of our dining room. Ah. I see now. That makes sense.’ She rubs my arm, smiles and walks out the kitchen without another word. Her compassion warms through me.

‘What do you see, Mamá?’ Leonor calls after her. She turns on me, looking peeved and feeling it.

‘The seersage was in him,’ I say after a satisfying delay.

‘You sensed an ánimo that was under seersage’s influence itself,’ she says nodding. ‘That does make sense. You should see a guía. Your mind could be mush. Which would explain how you can consider bonding with that family.’

‘Is spending time with people outside the synod a bad idea? We do it every day in our jobs. You work with Upperburbers. Most of the judges and prosecutors I deal with are Upperburbers too. Hech, you prefer Upperburb lascivanos.’

Her irritation fires through me briefly, but she recovers. I feel with clarity her frustration at my naivety. There is a burning quality that I associate most of her emotions with – a tag, a kind of emotional marker of her ánimo that helps me distinguish her feelings from my own.

‘Kinetics are different, even among Upperburbers,’ she says. ‘I had a Kinetic lascivano once. Just once. Well, he was more of a sedado. It was very imbalanced. They see themselves as the apex of Potent genetics. The Veloxes are no exception. They may have come to power recently and very much disrupted the synod, and they definitely caused a stir when Niobe Velox became Progressive leader, because by the Magon they were afraid of what she represented, but that doesn’t mean they’re good people. If anything, it makes them more dangerous.’

I have a witty retort prepared, but I’m stopped by a sudden, intense rumbling sound.

The ground starts shaking violently, glass shatters nearby, wood rattles, metal creaks. I grab hold of the kitchen counter to steady myself. The quake lasts only a few seconds, but the sentido común flashes an almighty surge of panic and terror, sending me reeling into dizziness my body

unable process sudden download collective emotion whole barrio I must calm must calm the breathing so much panic calm my my breathing calm my nerves are on fire on fire on fire

on

fire

I want to ram ram ram ram my head into the floor the panic the panic so much panic why is everything so … s—

When I'm aware of my surroundings again, I find myself on the kitchen floor. Leonor is beside me, holding her head and groaning.

'What in the name of the Magon was that?' I rasp.

Mamá is back and massaging her temples. 'I think the Magial Isle is migrating,' she says.

We stare back at her. 'What do you mean we're migrating?' Leonor says. 'We haven't moved in decades!'

'That was a shiftquake. Most of the damn thoughts of this fucking Barrio think so too.' She pounds her head with her fist.

I get up carefully – worried the earth might start wobbling – and fumble to the cabinet where we keep inhibidor. I toss everyone a whole bottle. Mamá takes a swig without measuring. Leonor materialises a glass to dilute hers, which she pours with a bit more care. I glug with vigour. While my nerves tingle from the inhibidor's effects, Mamá summons a newscast on her crystalpod and expands the refraction so we can all see. A short, stocky woman, hair glowing in brilliant, oscillating flames of blue, orange and yellow, is speaking in the Subcouncil chamber. Frederika Glouw. She looks like a benevolent grandmother (albeit with a head literally on fire), reaching her arms out as if to embrace her people in her gentleness and warmth, but her smile is too grand, too tightly stretched over her teeth, too inconsistent with the austerity in her eyes. Her voice is soprano, yet it booms, made easier by the snap and whip of her cultivated Hightongue accent, which caresses the Standard Formal language. '… of the ongoing security challenges in the region, with a heightened risk of exposure to the Impotentate. And so, Eminent Speaker, I have this morning, after consultation with the Grand Council, directed the immediate withdrawal of the Magial Isle from our current anchor off the East African seaboard to a temporary position – more isolated and secure – below the Antarctic Circle.'

There are jeers from the opposite benches, which aren't visible from the camera angle. One yells, 'Disgraceful!'

The Grand Master merely lifts her voice a few notes higher and regards the politicians before her as a schoolma'am would behold naughty children. 'Eminent Speaker,' she says, 'I undercog that this is a sudden and unexpected migration' – shrieks and laughter almost cut her off – 'but I assure my fellow Potent citizens that it is unquestionably in our civilisation's interest that we withdraw from geographic proximity to the Impotentate for a time. Our first priority is and must always be the protection of Potents from those who would do us harm should they discover our existence. Our prolonged location would have risked that very horror.'

The camera cuts to the opposition. Niobe Velox, sitting regally at the centre of the front bench, is stroking her hovering necklace and leering at the Grand Master. The Progressive subcouncillors clustered about her are apoplectic: a Botanial man is screaming something unintelligible, pounding his fist in the air. He and his colleagues are thrashing around their still, steely leader – a viper preparing an attack. I notice a few of the legislators are gripping their chairs tightly. They must have just experienced the shiftquake as well right in that chamber.

The camera cuts back to Glouw as she continues, 'The Subcouncil will no doubt recall, Eminent Speaker, that the withdrawal of Societal Service recruits from secondments in South Africa was completed in November of last year. By next Monday, all Service officers in other locations on the continent will be repatriated. Agents of the Intelligence Bureau and other Potent staff will evacuate all posts on the continent within three weeks. The Withdrawal will be complete. We must now turn our attention to a period of seclusion, before determining where our energies should best be expended for the decades to come.'

Wisps of rage are crackling through me now: the sentido is picking up the anger of the Barrio as residents discover the news. Fortunately, the inhibidor is starting to muffle the stream. 'This is huge,' Leonor whispers.

Niobe Velox has risen to speak. The Subcouncil seems more supportive of her, even though the Progressives are very much a minority caucus. The heckles turn into acclamations. The Mediciant subcouncillor behind Velox is now nodding sagely. 'Eminent Speaker, I confess I was irked this morning when I was dicted, as indeed all Eminent Subcouncillors were, that Her Supremacy had called an emergency session of the House at such an early hour,' Niobe says slowly. Her accent is a few degrees less Hightongue than I heard her use last night. 'I wonder, perhaps, if she could have timed the Isle's movements a shade better, so that esteemed colleagues did not have to experience a shiftquake in this chamber just fore she dicted us of the source of that shiftquake.' She pauses to allow her caucus to bellow their agreement. 'Then again, perhaps this was part of the theatre, the theatre in which this Mastery and the Preservist

Caucus have engaged time and again, the spectacle of power that she and her ministers glimmer, whilst they ignore the vacancy of their policies and the ruin of their government. Perhaps this was the last gasp of a dying government, weeks fore key Subcouncil elections.' She revels for a few seconds in the glee from her colleagues. 'What isn't theatric, Eminent Speaker, is the very real fact that ordinary Potents on this island must now tolerate dangerous shiftquakes for months, possibly years, as we sail towards the Antarctic Ocean, of all places. The disruption to people's lives may be minor at first, but what plans has Her Supremacy made to prepare us for the extreme change in climate we are about to experience? Are our homes prepared for near-constant freezing temperatures? Will our buildings and our roads and flywalks handle the ice and snow? And what of the significant delays in transport times we will now have to endure between the Isle and our missions in the Impotentate?

'But on that point, Eminent Speaker, on that very point, can I ask the Grand Master if she would deign to clarify if her statement, that her mysterious Withdrawal is complete, means that we do not retain *any* intelligence or surveillance presence on the continent at all? Do we still have any operatives in other areas? Or has she just orchestrated a full-blown, planet-wide withdrawal of Potents from every region of the Impotentate? How are we to sustain our security interests if we cannot monitor Impotents up close? And, of course, Eminent Speaker, the biggest question of all remains, which I have been posing to Her Supremacy every time she has found the energy to juxt us down here.' Much of the Subcouncil is now on its feet, a chorus of affirmation. 'What happened in South Africa? What is she not dicting the Subcouncil? Why have we left so suddenly? Why did we need a Withdrawal?'

'Work needs me,' Leonor says. 'I've been summoned.' She hurries out to shield her thoughts from Mamá.

'Do you remember how frequent these shiftquakes will be?' I ask Mamá.

'A few a day as the Isle moves from stationery. They'll taper off until we come to a stop. The foundations have had decades to set.'

'The Antarctic? Why pick that region of all places?'

'It's the closest secluded area to where we are right now. Something happened in Africa, something they're not willing to tell us. Your new conocido's mother may know more than she's suggesting. She will have been briefed in the Grand Council. I'm sure of it.'

'She's asking Glouw in the Subcouncil so she can force the information into the public domain?'

Mamá nods absently as she absorbs herself again in the livestream.

Glouw's decision to manoeuvre the Magial Isle is so stunning in its randomness and so immediately palpable that the Society seems to hold its collective breath. Three more shiftquakes strike just on my way into work. Passengers on the flybus exchange diatribes about the Grand Master's strategy and opine on her idiocy, forging the kind of inter-synodic camaraderie that doesn't arise often in the Society, even if it's in a vehicle carrying Midburb professionals with similar anxieties. Beneath all the snipes and grumbles and predictions, I sense the passengers' anxiety. I find myself allied with an Electrient woman who did her Societal Service stint in Cape Town while I was up in Johannesburg. She tells me in energised agitation that she feels cleaved from the Impotents she had grown to feel some affection for, even if from invisible craft and underground bases. She looks out the grubby window at the passing Mediciant district with a kind of pained pity. On the seats in front of us, two old men, who look like Barotics from their quivering white hair, have reached the shared political nihilism so common to Midburbers. 'You know how these people operate, Ivor,' the one of the left grumbles. 'Glouw knew the Preservists were on the verge of wipeout in the Subcouncil, so she did what politicians up there always do. Invent danger from the Impotents and show strength in fleeing!'

'Fuckers, all of them!' his companion mutters. The swearing is loud enough to make several passengers stare, but the disgust at the political atmosphere is so great that the flybus seems to find the word fittingly shocking. 'Do you remember the Migration of '68? Shiftquakes lasted three years! All that steering to get the Isle around the African coast. Remember they got Barotics to hold up the old Commerce Centre building? It was about to fall straight through the Business District, right into who knows how many Midburb, Lowburb blocks!'

Many of the younger passengers are listening in now, clutching bag straps and shaking heads and ignoring crystalpod screens in favour of awe and worry. There was only one migration since 1968, if I understand correctly. We've grown up in a Society that seemed so static.

'There's another one!' someone shouts, pointing outside. Even at our speed, it's clear the buildings are swaying. Pedestrians are gripping railings and columns and each other.

The first Barotic's tone darkens. 'Glouw either just ensured the Preservists' wipeout or secured their majority for years. Maybe Velox will remember where she came from.'

His partner swears to the cabin.

Chapter 7

I haven't heard from Taye Velox in the two weeks since Glouw's decision, nor have I made contact with him. The promise to 'bond around' has evaporated with the collective unsettling and I can't bring myself to ask a Kinetic heir to spend time with me. It seems so trivial amidst the unease around me. But I catch myself staring at Taye's crystalpod frequency often. It shines on the glass next to other contacts, a name so incongruous in a list of mostly Sensorials. He's so disconnected from my life, yet this connection, this means of reaching, is right here, a tap away from being real. The gush of feeling I'd felt that night at Club Pique has lifted, yet something of Taye lingers in me. It's as if the seersage burned strands of ánimo into the corners of my soul. Mamá and Leonor don't mention it, but I see it in their eyes when I catch them watching me and feel the worry in their ánimos. I'm sure they also know I haven't touched the money.

Isaac keeps mentioning the change. It's made him more eager. I turned to him for sacia, a simple physical satiation, but I feel him eager for the Taye in me. He's drawn to the parts of my ánimo that shimmer with Velox ego. His body softens at once when I touch him and he climaxes with a joyous ferocity that makes me feel at once desired and mistaken. Maybe he's drawn to the emotionalia themselves. I end up at his apartment door most nights now. He says his saciamañero wants to evolve their conexión into a caloristad or lascivanistad. I'm his retreat from the shifting commitments. It's so Sensorial to be aware of all these dynamics, even if they overwhelm me so often.

Shiftquakes erupt randomly now – during a shower, at breakfast, once in Isaac's bed, frequently at work. The older Sensorials keep telling us younger ones that these are quite normal, that the Migration of '68 from the Caribbean was far more disruptive, but I see their fear and the sentido común confirms the extent of the community's weariness. Protests are erupting more often too. Some become brawls. Glouw sends the Guard in to clean up.

Isabel is despondent. When she sees seat-by-seat seerscopes one evening, she declares that politics in this Synod is dead and disappears from her obsessive campaigning for a few days. Mamá similarly has become righteous in her anger with the Barrio. One evening, she storms home complaining that the pensado común has only solidified in its support for Sensorial Independents after the Migration, that campaigning will serve no purpose, that imperialism has won and that the Progressives are 'pretenders playing clumsily with revolutionary ideas'.

Bienoyente, the lone Progressive candidate for our barrio's seat, has been reduced to handing out gaudy flyers in entrance lobbies, while the supporters of the Sensorial Independents shout obscenities at her. Isabel joins with suggestions as to how the Independents might fuck themselves. Mamá, on two or three occasions, tells the Independents off for assuming Sensorials shouldn't work with other synods, but the response is usually something along the lines of Mamá being an elitist academic with ethnically spurious ideas about other synods and their backwards ways infecting Sensorial culture.

It's only when Niobe Velox announces that the Progressives would use a majority on the Subcouncil, if the election goes their way, to gut the government of resources and legislative support to continue the Migration that Isabel and Mamá start sounding hopeful again. When I suggest to Isabel that stopping the shiftquakes might just be an opportunistic campaign slogan, she responds simply, 'At this point, whatever it takes!'

I've tried to tell her my voice is useless in the comunes, drowned out as it is by the thousands of other Sensorials in the Barrio whose politics are as concrete as the sidewalk. She senses my indecision. I sense it from her and she senses that, which just leads to a muddle of retracting feelings between us. 'Mamá and Leonor are the political ones in my family,' I tell her one evening after Bienoyente has abandoned campaigning. She's read the hatethought of most of the building.

Isabel is picking up loose pamphlets, pausing at times at Bienoyente's optimistic printed smile. 'You agree with their politics though,' she says, a statement offered with the potential of enquiry.

'In my job, I defend Lowburbers and Midburbers every day from Upperburb overreach,' I say. She pauses. 'I'm not as politicised as you and Mamá are, but I do see how the Society needs change. The Upperburb synods have swapped the Grand Mastery between themselves for centuries and keep us all in our lanes. I see what happens when those lanes are breached. Whether a Prog majority on the Subcouncil will change anything, I don't know. The Grand Council is where the power lies.'

'And when were you going to tell me you'd met Plenipotentiary Velox?' Her hands scrunch the papers. She knows me too well not to sense my irritation at that question.

'She's intimidating, and memorable, certainly. Otherwise, she struck me as just a very powerful person, who acts just as any Kinetic would in her position.'

Isabel's ánimo sinks. 'I'm not naive. I know she isn't perfect. In a lot of ways, she's a flawed hero, but her past is the right narrative for us.' She's sounding like Bienoyente at the

expiratory side of a rally. ‘Born into a Barotic family, manifesting kinetickry so young, rejected by Kinetic schools, turns activist during the Liberation Summer, denied citizenship into the Kinetic Synod, only gets it by marrying into a very noble bloodline that produced who knows how many grand masters and showing a magiary they’re all jealous of. Her life demonstrates exactly what the Progressives say is the indictment of our system. The synods are clunky vestiges of the Purges. They serve little purpose in a modern, thriving Society. The fact that she acts like she was born speaking Hightongue is beside the point. The Kinetics couldn’t bear to accept their bloodlines don’t breed all the kinetickry in the Potentate. If we can get the Progressives a majority on the Subcouncil, that will show that there’s momentum for change. And because she sits on the Grand Council as Kinetic Master as well, having the majority of the Subcouncil would be the perfect impetus to get the Grand Council to elect her in as Grand Master.’

‘There’re a lot of steps there, Isabel. The Grand Council meets in secret.’

‘You could have told me you met her. You know I admire that woman. And you could have told me about bonding a consumidad with her son.’

If her intention was to trigger my guilt so she could bathe in that feelingstream, she’s succeeded. Isabel and I have hovered between presencia and intimañía most of our lives. Her ánimo and her words are arcing towards intimañía again. ‘Consumidad? You know, you’re the first person to get close to whatever the fuck it was I felt with him. Consumidad is close. It did feel intense, consuming, emotionally heavy.’

I’ve made this about me. We hesitate in each other’s presence in that Sensorial way, our conexión adjusting to the shifts. ‘There’s something different about your ánimo, you know. No, don’t get angry at me!’

‘I’m not angry, I’m just—’

‘I’m literally sensing your anger.’

‘I’m just – I don’t know. Meeting him was weird.’

‘Look at us discussing our silly little Sensorial conexiones when so much is at stake,’ she says and tears up the pamphlets.

When I do hear from Taye Velox again, it’s on the Friday morning before the elections. I arrive at work early to escape the sentido común’s electoral angst. The Barrio’s choice has been clear for days. All we need now is some overpaid elders to read the pensado común and sense the sentido común and make the official call.

My crystalpod pings with a message from my boss ordering the public defenders on duty, from all departments, to report to the Court of Order. It isn't my usual beat, but apparently they need everyone.

A crowd is being herded towards an antechamber. Many are shouting at the attorneys, and some at the Guard who have been placed at intervals on the periphery, most carrying Pyrrhic weapons.

'Vidente, verit?' It's the senior attorney from one of the other departments – Counterterrorism, I think. If they've dragged an Upperburber down here, things must be very serious. 'The Mastery has put pressure on the Prosecution Authority to process everyone here immediately. I wit you have your expertise in the Exit Permit Department, but there are political forces that need finessing, you viz?'

'What exactly happened?' I ask, ducking just in time to miss an airy mass whip right by my head. Air pressure drops for a second before wind thwacks through us. Guards rush into the crowd to find the Barotic who caused that. 'What are the charges?'

The attorney curses as she tries to straighten her hair. 'Public disturbance. Many have been charged with an illegal attempt to exit the Isle, some also with conspiracy to commit an insurrection. They were at Exit Control at the Extrasocietal Airport when the shiftquake struck this morning. Gleamly, they stormed the barriers when they doshed that Glouw had cancelled exit permits. Torched up a max clash up. The Guard responded with the sober and measured response for which we've come to ken them. The Grand Mastery wants us to gleam in control for electoral reasons, you undercog. Now do you prefer to take Sensorials?'

'If they speak Midtongue or Lowtongue, I'm take them.'

She nods at the crowd while she prods her crystalpod. 'I'll give you the Electrient.'

The Electrient in question, a leaf of a man who keeps zapping anyone nearby he considers a 'collaborator of the regime', is exactly the kind of client who doesn't deserve public defence. Under the crowded staircase, an area set aside for hasty attorney-client conferences, he openly admits within minutes to having electrocuted three permit officials in the brawl. His Midburb synod would usually get him off easily, but the Mastery has ordered every detainee to be trialled under a common judge. Getting him to plead guilty doesn't take much convincing, mercifully, which means I dump him by mid-morning and I'm available to represent five other people – all in one day.

It's a whirlwind of paperwork, rushed conversations, panicked rumours that civil order is eroding in the City outside, repetitious arguments before a Quantic judge who looks like he

wants to lock everyone up just for ruining his day (he quantises handcuffs when he's agitated), and not infrequent pauses for shiftquakes, which have the effect of keeping us on edge and gripping whatever surface is nearby just in case the ground gives way.

My other clients are three Barotics, another Electrient and a pitiful Aquial who makes floors slippery enough to cause the prosecutor to trip in front of the judge, so she'll spend a few nights in jail. I feel for the Lowburbers (the Cryonics, Thermics and one or two Botanials), many of whom are being given novice defenders. I wonder how many of them were at the Extrasocietal Airport for travel. More likely, they were workers caught up in an unfortunate incident.

As gruelling as the workday turns out to be, it's a worthy distraction. Six rapid trials, virtually screamed at a judge with no more than a few minutes to conclude each person's freedom, absorb my mind in legal minutiae. I'm in the final seconds of my last trial when a defender taps on my shoulder and whispers that a 'spooky Luminent lawyer' wants to speak to me. Three flights of stairs around the central atrium have to be negotiated and I'm out of breath just in time to come face to face with an obscenely handsome, tight-suited man, who is blocking the staircase landing. It takes a few seconds before I register that I'm looking at a mirage, the skilled manipulation of light. Most Luminents can't maintain facades as granularly detailed as this one. He's also creepily close to the kind of form I find attractive – this cannot be a coincidence. I'm still on the last step beneath him, which makes him seem even taller.

'Miguel Vidente?' he asks, not bothering to luminate the contempt out of his eyes, or the eloquent slicing of his Hightongue, even if he is gorgeous.

'I am,' I pant in reply. I try to throw my vowels closer to the sides of my mouth so I sound more sophisticated, then chastise myself for the elitist yearning.

'My client has been dicted to slosh after your services as counsel.' His tone suggests he's trying to suppress laughter, but his luminence hides it. He nods to the person behind him.

Leaning against a banister, contemplating tiredly the open atrium onto which the balcony opens, is a woman I recognise instantly, though I haven't seen her since I was at Club Pique. Miranda Lightly. Taye's – well, I'm not sure what she is to him. Unlike that night, she isn't wearing any opulent jewellery, levitating or otherwise, but has donned instead an almost ugly beige suit. The only hint of her Kineticity is her softly moving hair, strands of which are absentmindedly curling and uncoiling.

'Apologies. Who exactly dicted to your client to slosh after my services?' I ask.

‘Taye Velox,’ he replies farcically. His pecs are swelling. ‘He is insistent. You are a public defender, verit?’ He says the words as if enunciating filth, even as his jawline sharpens. How do Luminents ever get any work done?

‘Yes, and I’m sorry, sir, but I don’t take private clients. I defend those who can’t afford private counsel, Lowburbers and Midburbers. I’m sure Miss Lightly can afford it.’

‘Which is what mystifies us,’ murmurs Miranda, turning languidly and gliding to join the Luminent. ‘Why on earth would Te dict me I should obb a public defender?’ Her giggles are less successfully restrained than her lawyer’s. For once, I wish the scrubbers weren’t operative. ‘Imran, give us a moment, will you, amic?’ Miranda says.

Imran’s body blurs into a sterner, older man, who bows to Miranda and glides from the staircase landing towards a door that I know leads to private attorneys’ chambers. The door might as well say ‘UPPERBURBERS ONLY’.

Miranda strokes her chin. I take her pause as a chance to attempt an exit. I go three steps back down the staircase so I don’t have to ask her to move out of the way. ‘We have a load of people to process through rapid court downstairs. I must get back,’ I say. I won’t give her the satisfaction of my Hightongue.

‘Who exactly *are* you?’ she says, almost in a flutter.

‘As I said to you the other night, I’m Miguel Vidente, Sentient Sensorial and public defender, who served in Johannesburg on the same Service base with you, remember, and whose jobs awaits.’

She lunges down the staircase so quickly I nearly fall backwards. She halts mere inches from my body, quick ferocity instantly restrained, her hand still caressing her chin. A lock of her long hair curls towards my face as if it wants to strangle me. The absence of a sense from her – anger or a need to hurt – is disconcerting. The scrubbers make this scene too clinical.

‘Who exactly are you?’ she hisses. Her accent and grammar stir into an extreme Hightongue. The shift is almost as frightening as her now waving serpentine hair. Language so glamorous would seem absurd in my mouth, but in hers it oozes, a natural register for her patrician throat. ‘I’ve never met you fore, vir, yet somewise, *you*, a Feeler, a Midburber, obb up into an exclusive Loftry club, merge around and equate about with Alti elites, then you glimmer and dazz up, solo, the powerful filius of the Master of the Kinetic Synod. Some Sensorials cohere with me – of course, I’m no classist – but you obb up, unwist, and torch up instant leverage over my fiancé. Now he wants you to be my attorney in a case that is so far above your civil servant’s pay grade. Who the fucking brujo are you?’

I gasp. I gasp and I can't help it. My nerves freeze. The slur, pronounced with the incorrect consonant, is an absolute chisel.

Brujo. Witch. Male witch.

'You should thank the Magon that a combination of inhibidor overdose and anti-Sensorial scrubbers make it hard for me to be afraid of you and your ease with that word,' I say.

'I don't need your fear, mini vir,' she breathes. 'I just need to wit how you obbed to dazzle up my fiancé.'

Despite what I've said, I am afraid of her. I don't know how potent she is, but if she's being prepared for marriage with Taye, it isn't unreasonable to assume she could hurt me with a flap of her heavy eyelid. And yet, Miranda Lightly is talking to me. She has means, she's spewing overt anti-Sensorial hatred, but she is taking the time to talk to *me*. I must be a threat to her.

'As I said to you, Taye and I knew each other during our Service in Johannesburg. That's all. And you might be interested to know that he hasn't said that you and he are engaged. Somehow, through all that time I spent with him on that beautiful little patio, that didn't come up.' Again, I wish I could sense her. Her face is still. 'What legal help do you require, anyway?'

'A mini problem with an exit permit,' she remarks as if we haven't just parleyed. 'Naturally, with this Migration happening, exiting is a minum harder than fore. It's max past your expertise, vir. You'd be lost in our synodic law. It's convoluted and everybit rests on conflicting hereditary rules.'

'If you were going to decline Taye's request to hire me, why did you summon me?'

'To awit myself of your innocuousness. And, to warn you not to obb in politics you don't comprehend. We wouldn't want Taye to be dazzed up by nefarious elements, especially by virs who promote depraved Feely ideas that are clearly imported from the Impotentate, unnatural sexual preferences or whatever it is ye people do in that grotesque synod with your bodies and brains. Taye is very unaffected in that regard, I awit you. I undercog your politics are quite radical, as are your mother's. I'm surprised her university still hires philosophes as provocative as she.' The warning is clear. 'Perhaps we'll ping you an invitation to the wedding so you can assuage your jealousy,' she nearly hums as she parades away.

I realise I'm squeezing the banister and sweating. What made me think that practising empathy with a Kinetic was wise? I'm playing with extraordinarily dangerous people.

I chime Taye's crystalpod five times before he answers. The screen vibrates with the magial sonic connection, making my cheek tingle. I gallop down the stairs to let my body's movement

distract my rising anxiety. ‘Fratelle, I was just voying to ping you,’ Taye says with that insufferable joviality. ‘Did Miranda Lightly dict to you?’

‘Dict to me? Taye, she outright threatened me and my family. What were you *thinking*?’

He doesn’t miss a beat. ‘She threatens everyone. It’s her style. Anywise, you’re perfect for her case. I wanted to give you a boost, you wit. As your friend.’ He says the word with glittering charm, but it lands abruptly.

‘First of—’ A small shiftquake interrupts what would have been an angry response. The marble floors and walls send me sliding almost directly into a Guardsman. ‘First of all,’ I continue when the quake has subsided, ‘you don’t need to do me favours as payment. Second of all, let’s interrogate the definition of friendship when it involves threats from a person of extreme power and privilege against my socially disempowered family. And third of all, I can’t even do private legal work. It’s against my contract and what Upperburber would ever listen to my counsel?’

‘You’ll be sitting on the case as co-counsel, not leading it.’

‘Did you hear a word I just said, Taye?’

‘I’m just being helpful. You sense you can cred me, verit?’

‘Not over a crystalcall and not while I’m in a scrubbered palace.’

‘Can I obb you over to my apartment?’

This is like talking to a toddler. ‘No, Taye, you cannot obb me. Unlike the upper classes, I have to work for a living—’

‘Your workday finished three minutes ago.’

‘How would you know that?’

‘Because I have a job too, genius, in the same building as you. Rewit?’

‘This is too dangerous. I take back what I said to you the other night. I have sympathy for you, but I can’t get involved in your world. I’m not supposed to be anywhere near it. The least you can do is tell Miranda Lightly not to heching touch me or my family.’

‘She won’t and she can’t.’

His voice sounds different. It’s not coming from the crystalpod anymore. ‘Fuck it, cabrón!’ He’s standing by the lift, dressed like I saw him on the flypath weeks ago: formal suit, cut in the sleek Kinetic fashion, the pink lapel pin of his mother’s Progressives the only spot of colour. His bag is on the floor. He’s been waiting. That same languid swagger moulds his movements. Without being able to probe his feelings, I see only what the non-Sentient world sees: a laid-back rich kid.

‘Has anyone ever used a slur against you?’ I ask him. ‘Do you even know what that feels like?’

‘I’m a dark-skinned man in the European bloodline-obsessed Kinetic synod. Of course people have used slurs against me, fra.’ He has a point, of course, which deflates my ire. ‘Miranda’s bloodline is one of the purest Kinetic harvests in history. She just doesn’t like it when upstarts equate about with her birthright.’

‘Why are you marrying her then? For that matter, why is she marrying you? Wouldn’t she despise your unique heritage?’

His eyes search mine for a second, calculating. ‘Oh, she doesn’t like my heritage. Bono, my father’s, yes, not my mother’s. But my proximity to the current centre of power in the synod changes her calculus. The election might too.’ Once again, I find myself feeling empathetic for him, despite the danger his casual actions have put me in. ‘Cred me, fratelle,’ he says, staring at the ground, again using that piercingly Hightongue term of endearment between equal men, ‘I don’t want to marry her.’ He straightens, looks up and smiles too broadly. ‘Drifty, she can find her own counsel. Would your magiary sense min if you were in a private flycar than in a flybus?’

‘You’re not hearing me, Taye.’

‘I am, fra. Cred me.’

‘If that’s true, you’d see how fucked my life has become in just a few minutes – all because of you.’

He folds his arms reflexively and turns to the side for a moment. ‘I cogged you dicted you were open to bonding around some. Or was all that dicta about reaching out and being with just some Sensorial exteria?’

The accusation wasn’t unexpected, but the force of it makes me laugh, even though I try to catch it before my chest spasms. Taye’s eyes are flicking between mine again. I wonder how many people he ever trusts, how much irritation my silence since Club Pique could possibly have caused. I want him to know that I thought of reaching out, but even now his presence here at the end of my workday seems so insane.

He looks down for a second and sighs, his face grimacing, plunging his hands deep in his coat pockets. He says, ‘There’s something I want to show you, that I need to show you. Give me one hour of your time. Then, if you want, I’ll obb you a flycab home, I’ll obb my mother’s security to threaten the Kineticity out of Miranda and we’ll never dict again. Just let me show

you that one thing, verit? That's all I ask. You can have me repeat all this outside the entrance if you want to sense my intentions without the scrubbers.'

'Something tells me you'll ask more of me once I know what this one thing is.'

He replies rapidly, his words almost choking, 'You're the only person I cred right now. Despite …' He pauses, perhaps finding the momentum of disclosure for the first time. 'You're different in a scrubbered room.'

The statement hangs for a while. I don't know how to respond to it without deciding if the version of myself under scrubbers is more real than the other one.

'I cog you're the only person I cred. I need you.' His intonation rises at the end slightly, tucking the words into a curled vulnerability.

This isn't worth the risk. Miranda's threats and her hateful language have rattled me. She did that only because I appeared in her life, which happened only because Taye magially bound me to him, because Taye was high. Being in his orbit is clearly, profoundly dangerous. Leonor was right. Whatever compassion and connection I felt is still here, but it isn't enough to propel me into rashness, is it? I could always go back home, find Isaac, ease into sacia with him if he hasn't evolved out of sacia, maybe push it towards lascivanistad. Instead, I'm talking to this man who is utterly incapable of understanding sacia or lascivanistad, certainly between two men, and hopelessly incapable of knowing what I could possibly need.

Taye is looking around nervously. 'One hour. That's it,' I say. It won't be.

I expect him to respond with his trademark amicable cheer, but he nods solemnly. I prepare my body for the emotional onslaught outside, and for the nagging voice in my head trying to stop me from doing something perilous.

Chapter 8

Taye claims that his flycar is modest. I don't know what he thought I was expecting. Few Potents ever own their own flycar, let alone something like the gleaming teardrop he takes me to. I half expect champagne to materialise when I sit down. The top half is entirely glass, creating the impression that the seats, a single padded ring, are flying in the open, which is at once invasive and luxurious. The onboard crystalslab is a thing of majesty too: it is literally crystal clear, a panel of gloss, no discolouration or shabby scuffs. Taye just has to wave over it for the flycar to move magially and autonomously. 'It's second-hand,' he says with misplaced gravity as the vehicle lifts out of the parking lot and glides into an airlane.

'You read *Hermanas Encatadas?*' I ask, pointing to the article on the glass.

'Shouldn't I?' In the glow of his ánimo again, I sense a shot of guilt. 'Those seerscopes are superious. I cogged they were firm.'

'They're literary. Clairvoyants sense the future more than they see it. It's all very metaphorical.'

My body is settling into his feelingstream like finding a familiar and comfortable blanket. His emotions are brooding, weighing him down, but they also flicker and oscillate with relief.

Dusk is settling on the City. Traffic is frenetic, but the ambience is expiratory. Guard flycars are parked at many street corners, which seems to have intimidated the restless crowds from protests and campaign events into leaving. There is litter, though, around the patrolling Guardsmen's feet, and I catch some cracked shop windows and one burning flycar chassis. As we move from the oldest and densest part of the cityscape, the flywalks become boulevards and the traffic thins into pearls of smaller craft like Taye's. Taye is quiet for a few minutes and stares out the window. 'Were things as chaotic inside the Needle where you were?' I ask. 'I spent the day processing rioters through the court system.'

'High political theatre,' he says, grinning, the gloss reemerging. 'My mother likes nothing more. It's all campaign mode.'

'Was she lying in the Subcouncil when she pretended not to know why the Isle was migrating?'

Taye's expression is neutral, but a nervousness whispers at me. 'I don't wit what she wits,' he says. 'We're here.' I'm surprised. We haven't reached Loftry, or even close to it. In fact, it

looks like we're still a good two streetlevels beneath the open skyline, so technically still in the Midburbs. The architecture appears to have aspired towards opulence a long time ago, but now it's lost its sheen. A group of Electrient teenage boys is blasting technolyre from a crystalslab on the pavement while they dare to out-electrocute each other. By a magball court, a mother and toddler are staring into each other's eyes, reacting with vivid expressions to a silent conversation. Sensorials. At tables outside an apparently popular corner pub, inter-synodic clientele mingle, including a Pyrrhic woman who is trying hard not to let her blue-hot fringe sear the face of the man she's kissing. A Guardsman is watching the couple a little too eagerly. The flycar turns along a side street and slows to a hover by a modest apartment block. Taye's familiarity with this neighbourhood oozes into me, which jars with how new the scenes are to my mind.

'You cogged I curled up in a palace someplace like Loftry, didn't you?' he says. He practised that line.

'It's … diverse,' I reply as I get out the flycar. 'Not many areas like this still exist.'

'I would have cogged you'd prefer to live somewhere like this. You are Progressive, verit?'

'A lot of people make that assumption.'

He waits for a Guard flycar to pass before he leads me through the stuffy foyer and up the heavily carpeted and narrow staircase. 'When High Parks was built back in the early 1900s, the parks really were the highest in the skyline, hence the name. The Impotents in England dict the style Edwardian. I cog they vizzed the extravagance of the upper classes in Edwardian London and New York as a parallel to their own aristocratic status in this Society. They enjoyed infiltrating Edwardian social networks and governments.'

He's not wrong. 'Until World War II,' I add. We've climbed three flights already. Does he live so high just to make a point to his visitors?

'Most of the Alti moved out then, but enough stayed to make this a min melting pot. Which I coast up in much to the irritation of Maman. The Barotic Synod handles the rent here.'

It's clear he's choreographed my visit not just for the ominous thing he wants to show me, but to signal that he isn't like other Kinetics, that he has opted out of some of his birthrights, rents from his mother's ancestral community, that he understands the politics around his position. I'm not sure he's succeeded as well as he thinks, yet I cannot deny that he is more nuanced than I have assumed.

I'm out of breath by the time we reach Taye's door (he's trying to hide his own heavy breathing). It has no doorknob. Instead, he rests his palm on the wood. A series of clicking

sounds precede the door's creaking open. 'Kinetic pattern identification,' Taye says. The show-and-tell is starting to grate on me.

If Taye thinks his flat will impress me for its unimpressiveness, he hasn't achieved it. It's small, open plan, but the furniture is costly. He has a penchant for gold accents, which glitter amid the otherwise grey and beige of the décor. I've heard Kinetics like to levitate much of their furniture, but Taye has shunned the practice. The apartment is still, sedate and assiduously tidy.

There is artwork of (I assume) decent provenance on most walls. One painting pulls at me immediately: a man and woman, fairly young, both in 18th-century military attire – blue coats, triangular black hats, white cuffs and trousers – are floating next to a gold-veined magial tree. Behind them is a blurry battle. The man is levitating a gun, which aims off the frame. A dagger is above the woman's hand. Her eyes are aglow in its reflected light. She is the spitting image of Plenipotentiary Niobe Velox.

Taye hands me, without his magiary, a tumbler of what looks like whiskey. I'm not pleased that he thinks this is the kind of visit that needs alcohol. 'Nil magiocity, I promise. Maman had that repainted so the woman would resemble her,' he says, nodding towards the painting.

'I didn't realise your family had roots in Haiti.'

In a moment of uncharacteristic spontaneity, he clasps my shoulder, brusquely. But quickly releases. And drinks. And clears his throat. It seems to surprise him frequently that he doesn't need to dissemble in front of me.

'You're the first person to recognise that. That is the Haitian Revolution depicted, yes,' he says. 'Whether any of my ancestors were involved in it, I don't wit, or if they even come from there. My mother just dicts the Kineticity in our line obbs through Haiti.' Taye gives me a sceptical glance, probably wondering if I'll change the subject.

'That isn't the official story,' I say.

Taye sips. I sense amusement from him, but awkwardness too. 'What's behind the official story, you cog?' he asks.

'Did you bring me here to analyse your family history?'

'Humour me,' he says. He's stalling.

'Well, the story is she was born into a Barotic family,' I say.

'Everyone wits that. The Barotics can't stop advertising it.'

'The story she tells is her magiary manifested early and when no one could deny that her kinetickry wasn't just very powerful barotickry, her parents tried to apply to a Kinetic school, but they rejected her. She kept trying for years, but they kept saying no, denying she was veritly

Kinetic. When she was at university, she discovered the Progressive movement and got involved in the Revolutionary Summer, honed her magiary and demonstrated such magial skill so hard they couldn't deny her entry to the synod. And she met your father.' It feels odd describing what has always seemed to me an abstract narrative, punctuated into campaign messaging or dropped into conversation by stalwarts like Isabel to spread the mythos. It's a narrative we've gossiped about and debated, but it shaped him, the real person just inches from me.

'What's behind the official story?' Taye asks again.

I take a long sip. 'You should be the one telling me.'

He swirls his drink for a few moments. 'From what I undercog, there are accounts of kinetickry in Haitian history and in Ancient Africa, but Potent authors saw it as devilish. They had nil interest in investigating Potency in Africa, gleamly. We wit that slaves were brought to the Isle and many remained that way until abolition, and we wit that almost nil other immigration or rescue of African Potents or anyone with skin like mine was allowed until the late 19th century. Whenever and however they arrived, most of their wittance of their origins and magial practices of their homelands had been lost. Or it was erased. Fragments survived in oral histories, but they're vague.' His feelings are complex, made more vivid by his proximity.

'Do you know your Barotic family?'

His ánimo is steady. 'They live quietly in the Upperburbs.' He lets the statement hang undeveloped while he drinks.

'So, this is why she never mentions where her ancestors truly come from. She starts the story with growing up Barotic.' I say.

'No one who descended from the African Potents veritly wits the details. Even the Barotic ones. You'd cog with so many African descendants in that synod, by proportion, and the resources of the Midburbs those Barotic intelligentsia have had, that the wittance would have been shared or there'd be traditions that at least hinted at it. But the erasure was extensive, fra.'

'Is that why your family speaks French?' I ask.

'We only dict it ceremonially,' he says, glaring at his mother's likeness. 'It's a token of difference. Keeps us separate from those stuffy European Upperburbers.'

This isn't public information. The press would love to hear Taye Velox describing his own people this way. 'The Sensorial Synod is similar, in a way.'

'It isn't.'

'We—'

‘It isn’t,’ he snaps. ‘Your ancestors obbed in here voluntarily. You still dict their language. There’s communal memory.’

His frustration compels me to counter. ‘The fact we speak scraps of Spanish and say that Sensoriality originated in the Americas is a product of a skewed narrative. My ancestors probably came from all over the world. Power just concentrated in the hands of people with that ancestry. Our culture is an invention too. We stole Spanish as a useful marker. Just like your French, I suppose.’

‘But they chose to immigrate, didn’t they? They were given protected passage on the escapeliners, allowed to form a synod in the early Society. They could build community with Potents who shared their magiaries. They could unify around a common idea and choose Spanish as their tongue.’

‘Why do you feel disappointed right now?’ I ask.

He sighs and he squeezes my arm. ‘I don’t expect you to undercog, fra.’

I’m nervous. Come to think of it, I’ve been feeling more and more so since I arrived.

Taye’s ánimo pivots. He kneels at a spot on the floor and gestures and a section of wood lifts with a snap to reveal a metal box, small enough for Taye to levitate between his hands. With concentration I haven’t seen him use in kinetickry before, he guides it to the coffee table. Fear and nervousness and dread pulse. He sits and stares at the container, but makes no attempt to open it.

I feel the pull of that same ominous emotional undertone that I felt at Club Pique and on the flywalk, the morbid mass from which he runs but which haunts him, the drag on his mind and soul. Seeing that box has surfaced pain. My own heart is racing in spite of itself.

The seat opposite him is closest to where I’ve been standing, but I feel his wanting me to sit next to him. Despite myself, I do.

We are silent and still for a long time. My flesh settles into the feelingstream. Air crackles with foreboding.

Finally, Taye opens his mouth, but his voice shakes, so he coughs and tries again. ‘Fore I show you this, I need to ask you somebit.’

‘Will my answer determine whether or not you open that box?’ I ask.

‘It will determine what you fack with what’s inwise.’

Ignoring my mind’s warning that I’m crossing another line with this man, I nod. He takes a mammoth breath (which doesn’t have much effect on his nerves) and asks, ‘Am I veritous that

inanimate objects – everyday things – can carry a magial record of emotional and cognitive residue from the environment, which a Sensorial can access later?'

'It's called sensoricapture. We use it to create cargazos.'

'So, *any* object can store memories that people around it have had?'

'It depends on a lot of factors,' I say, speaking slowly and aware that I'm sounding overcautious. I remember how he subconsciously shattered glasses the other night. 'First of all, objects have to be magially charged or at least be in an environment with a very powerful magial field. Otherwise, nothing will stick. Some materials are better containers than others. Crystal, obviously, is the strongest. But objects with sentimental value can also be charged by the emotional valence. My family's cargazo is a jewellery box from some supposed ancestor. She brought it on a Societal escapeliner in the 1790s.'

He's nodding irritably. 'Yes, but objects that are near to the same person max, those are more likely to capture, verit?'

'Yes, extended exposure enhances the sensoricapture. So does the intensity of the emotions and thoughts. But sensoricapture isn't linear. A Sensorial can only access the collective information that is stored, all at once. It's brutally hard to decipher. People do postgraduate degrees for years on the methodology. Cargazos are really just ceremonial dumps of random stuff.'

I don't sense surprise. 'What if an object is on the body of someone who experiences … who exp—' He chokes. For a second I think he might vomit. I might vomit for that matter. I try to speak, but my own throat constricts in tandem. The windows are rattling. His empty tumbler starts spinning on the table.

He breathes deeply again and the kinetickry subsides.

'This is a lot, Taye,' I say. He sees my look but his eyes are wide. 'Are you sure you want—'

'What if,' he rasps, 'an object is clothing and it's on the body of someone who experiences a – trauma?'

We've reached an inflection point in his feelingstream. 'It would depend on the intensity of the emotionalia, the cognitia. But again, the clothing would need to be charged or the trauma would have to occur in a place where the magial field is strong.'

He stares at me for a long time, trying to control his breathing. His ánimo is churning through indecision and risk, flicking between trust and fear.

Finally, he rests his palm on the lid. I hear clicking noises, similar to those his front door made earlier, only these are more complicated and take longer to complete. Taye lifts the lid magially and holds out his palm. A single object floats out.

At first, it seems too mundane to justify the buildup. Then I recognise the logo.

And I want to flee.

'Please tell me that isn't what I think it is.'

'It's exactly what you cog it is.'

I push off the couch and retreat until my back is against a wall, as if getting distance from the hovering violation will be enough to save me.

'What the fucking sorcery were you thinking? You've brought an Impotent artefact across the border? Do you know how many laws you've broken?'

'It's a watch, fra. We make them here too.'

'Not with that logo, we don't! And not with that style! You and I both surveilled Impotents wearing that brand all the time in the Service.'

'Please sit down.'

'You've made me an accessory to a felony.'

'That's nothing compared to what happened to them!' he yells.

'Who's "them"?' I scream with his reflex.

His eyes are wet. As are mine. My ánimo is mirroring his, feeling for feeling. 'If I wist exactly, I wouldn't have obbed you here and shown you this befucked piece of—' He winces. A tear slips down his cheek. I don't think Taye has thought any of this through. It's a rush of raw feeling based on mere hours of tentative bonding. Nevertheless, somehow, despite a functional relationship that has lasted no longer than two weeks, he has trusted me with this.

'Please,' he breathes. 'Please viz if you can sense anybit from it, the sensoricaptured thing or whatever you dict it.'

'Why would you take this?'

'Because of who was wearing it, genius.'

'And who was wearing it?' I ask, my voice rising maniacally. He doesn't answer. 'Do you know already what I'd sense from it? Is that all this is, getting a helpless Sensorial to confirm something?'

That question scours deep into him. Glass shudders again. It might be a shiftquake; it might be Taye's magiary. He's breathing heavily. 'I have an idea, but there are – there are details you'd viz that I want you to viz.'

‘My sister would be better qualified to do this. I’ve only ever handled family cargazos, my apartment block’s cargita. I’d need some context to guide me.’

‘This was worn by an Impotent.’

‘Obviously.’

‘A boy. A …’ He stands quickly and with him rises much of the furniture in his sitting room. He barely notices. It clammers down again.

My chest is tight. My stomach burns. My heart pounds. I can’t feel my hands. Or my feet.

Taye half-runs to the kitchen counter and grips the surface floating furniture clammers watch follows tumbling Taye is

exerting control

have to control the

stream

the guilt memory memory it’s here here in the room can’t run

I can’t give you context Miguel I just I can’t why standing there idiot just touch befucked watch isn’t that what you do use magiary for me anybit but this cogging witting too much too much too much too—

I heave myself out of his mind, his ánimo. I shouldn’t be able to read his thoughts like that. This is wrong. This shouldn’t have anything to do with me. My life feels like it’s collapsing under the weight of a series of—

just touch the befucked thing can’t viz can’t cog

can’t cog—

Nonetheless, I cannot not feel propelled. Not forced or coerced, but compelled by the momentum of his suffering. This is the Sentient’s curse, to feel what isn’t expressed, be drawn to the unutterable, emote and be with.

‘I didn’t know you also smuggled Impotent contraband onto the base,’ I say. He’s confused. ‘You said this was worn by a boy?’

‘It – it was. I cog anywise.’

I kneel. The watch is dirty and scratched, but the logo is still obvious. In a Society that has other ways to mark status and desirability, the object is foreign. I haven’t touched it, but I can feel its aura. There is definitely sensoricaptured emotionalia there. ‘I don’t know what I’ll sense. Or if I’ll even be able to interpret any of it,’ I say.

His hand finds my wrist and grips hard. ‘I shouldn’t make you fack this. I …’

I extend a single finger and tooooooooouuuuuuccccccchhhhh iiiiiiitttttttt fucking hech of a what even the force the force the force sort sift sift Miguel don't let go the thought the thought the thought think through it think give space give feeling sift the feelings sift sift give space body it feel it in the muscle the nerves

sift

sift the feeling the life the soul this soul

this ánimo life a

real life

chafing blood so much blood

bleeding bleeding everywhere and the man with fire on his head

a man with fire on his head

control control the image control the image you see it the image find the image make it make sense the image feel the feeling make it make sense give space give feeling sift the feelings the screams screams

screams screams screams so much screaming

dad why did you do this

why why why why is it so dark

terror terror terror dad don't

please please please please please please please please pl—

p—

Chapter 9

Little beads of blue and yellow trickle across a pane, vibrating in trails and bubbles. That's all I'm looking at, flycar traffic a streetlevel up, peeking through the window, my sight blurry and spotty. It's all I think I have been looking at, for I don't know how long. The world has dissolved into little lights.

At some point, I feel my body shift. I'm on a sofa. I don't know how I got here. One leg is dangling over the armrest. Other stuff is lying randomly. There's a soft sloshing sound somewhere. Taye. Drinking from a wide-brimmed bottle. Drinking in glugs. He's on the floor next to me, head resting against the couch. I don't know if I sense him. My body is dull, overblown, short-circuited. He's staring at something, at nothing on the wall opposite. The necklace is limp. My eyes settle again on the distant flycars.

Taye rustles. He's looking at me. Weary. 'I …' I start, but my voice liquifies. 'What the fuck was … how long …'

He searches. He gets up and stumbles and then floats himself to straight. His device whips into his hand. 'Three hours,' he says, rubbing his eyes.

I groan. He floats the bottle towards me. 'Scapesage? Now?'

'What else do you want? I can brew wakesage.'

'No, it's not that. Never mind.' I push myself to seated, but all that does is send my head into dizzy rings.

'Yeah, you need wakesage,' Taye says. I watch him hover to the kitchen and start fiddling with a brewer I hadn't noticed. It's glossy, fancy. There is something graceful in his movements as he sifts the leaves, grinds them kinetically between his hands in a neat swirl, and tamps them into the brewer wand. It's an absorbingly calming, distracting sight, a charmer focused on a complex craft.

'I thought even Upperburbers quantised their wakesage,' I say, my voice finding itself again. I've managed to move to a table near the kitchen without collapsing.

Taye's face goes taut for a second. He pours the steaming moss-green liquid directly from the brewer into a cup that he sends to me. There's an eagerness in his expression when he sits opposite, but the tension is still there. 'Wakesage should alwise be brewed,' he says. 'Alwise. What? Not firm?'

‘No, it’s very good,’ I say, truthfully. The liquid is honey-like, oozing and stimulating. I can already feel the magium pumping at nerve ends. ‘It’s just my magiary is fried. Knocked me out. I thought I sensed something.’

He scratches the table. ‘What did you sense?’

‘I don’t know.’

His eyes quiver slightly. ‘Can I ask – it’s just, it’s been hours. You were staring out the window for so long. I didn’t wit if you were drifty or not. I just want to wit what – you wit?’

I sigh and drink for a while. I appreciate his attempt to hide his impatience. When the mug is empty and my blood feels thicker, I say, ‘I don’t even know what I sensed.’ He nods slightly. ‘I know you wanted me to see something, but … it was …’ The sinking in my core is the first indication that my magiary is returning. Taye leans back and folds his arms, nodding to himself as if the trauma that watch just dumped into me was foreseen. Or he’s confirming my uselessness to him now. ‘There was a lot of blood. I actually saw it. Which is weird because my brain doesn’t interpret feelingstreams through imagery – I usually just feel words, try to find language to make sense of what’s happening when my body is overwhelmed. But that watch, it made me see blood, so powerfully my magiary saw cogniscience. Someone … someone was bleeding. And there was a father. This is overwhelming you. I can stop.’

‘No,’ he half laughs. He’s still but his ánimo is trembling towards shattering again. ‘It’s drifty. Voy on. It’s exterious how you feel exactly what I do.’ He squeezes his eyes shut. ‘Did you viz any Potents there?’

There is a stream of electric nervousness zapping between us. ‘I don’t think so,’ I say, ‘but look, Taye, I don’t know if what I saw was direct visual memory or just my brain’s way of interpreting the emotionalia. It could be metaphors my mind is throwing up.’

He nods more rapidly now. ‘Bono, thank you for trying.’ He says it like all I did was try to open a tight lid or something.

‘Those emotionalia will be with me for a long time,’ I say, not entirely sure why I want him to know that. ‘That was intense. Don’t ask any Sensorial to try that again.’

His jaw clenches. There’s guilt somewhere in the ether, and it’s a bit soothing. ‘You can take my bed if you want. I’ll stay out here.’

He wants me to stay. Maybe I do too. His presence and the drip feed of his ánimo are tantalising, I admit. The conexión between us is amorphous and shifting. Whatever I’m drawn to, through whatever parts of myself, isn’t knowable and senseable and graspable like it would be if he was Sensorial. We’d have scripts and expectations. There’d be feedback. He’s dangerous. I

knew this earlier. I should have listened to my instincts, or the part of my instincts that aren't drawn to this man's inner world. 'No, I need to go home.' I wonder if I'll take that back, but I don't.

'You veritous? Let me drive you home at least.'

I open my mouth to say no, but even with my nervous system as overheated as it is, and even with all the protestations I can muster, the desire to cling to him sticks to me. He sees me chocking back words and a tiny smile twitches at one side of his mouth. But then it vanishes and his frame sinks. Whatever that watch hides tugs at his thoughts so often. What was he thinking inviting me into that?

He's found my crystalpod. 'My sister is too much sometimes,' I say when I see the seven missed chimes, the last of which was half an hour ago. 'Sure, you can take me home. Why not at this point?'

He doesn't move. 'You aren't going to chime her back?'

'She thinks you're dangerous.'

His face is static, but feelings tip towards a cradled agitation. 'Wouldn't you sense if I was dangerous?'

I give him a noncommittal sound and type a ping back to Leonor:

Relax

I'm coming home now

'You wit, there hasn't been a shiftquake all night,' Taye says in the flycar. He's bristling against the awkward silence that my tiredness keeps offering. 'The migration must be stabilising. Just in time for voting. Glouw wist what she was doing.'

The vehicle has found one of the paths that ring the island. Buildings are crammed on our left, but the right opens out to the dark sea. The contrast is arresting. Back in the Midburbs, the City can feel so endless and imposing in all directions. Out here the metropolis ends in vertical lines. The waves are breaking headily against the floodwall down at the Lowburb streetlevels. Two miles out, swirls of faintly flowing blue ripple upwards. It's too dark to make out clearly, but thick masses of water are piling against the Bubblefield as the Magial Isle pushes through the Indian Ocean. How much culture do we have that ascribes the Bubblefield with protection and comfort and warmth? And how many Potents see it as a cage, pierced only by legally sanctioned flybuses bound for espionage or Societal Service? Before Glouw sealed the border, anyway.

‘I have a question,’ says Taye. He’s picking at the walls I’ve started erecting. ‘Ye have dozens of words for different kinds of relationships, verit?’

‘Conexiones,’ I reply. ‘Relationships are just some of the arrangements of conexiones.’ He nods and returns to the window. ‘I sense the question you want to ask. Just ask it.’ He doesn’t know how to respond to that except to grin. Leonor pings if I’m travelling alone. I type:

No why? What’s wrong?

She doesn’t respond. Taye sees the typing and his feelings fidget for a moment.

‘So,’ I tell him, ‘the conexiones make sense among Sensorials. I’m not sure how a Kinetic factors in. We define conexiones through our magiaries.’

‘Gleamly Sensorials have had non-Sensorials as friends and lovers? Isn’t it verit that ye change words the max time?’

‘No, that would be chaos and a very pervasive stereotype.’

‘You dicted earlier that we had to interrogate the definition of “friend”. So, what’s the more superious word?’ He’s pretending to be absorbed by a speck on the window.

This conversation is glib considering the horrors we’ve both witnessed tonight. Taye is trying to avoid thinking about it too directly, but I can feel the energy he’s using to stay afloat. Even with all that effort and strain, there’s a vulnerability to asking for a word to define the conexión. I can’t help but be drawn to it, to cradle it. ‘A conexión is read from a pensario by a Cogniscient or sensed from an ánimo by a Sentient. It’s automatic. The words we have are just useful to summarise what is actually very complicated.’

The flycar has turned back into the City. The Barrio’s sentido común is settling on me as we approach. ‘So, what does my ánimo need?’ he asks.

Another Sentient would sense that I don’t want to talk about this, but there’s so much eager awkwardness wrapping Taye’s question that I can’t not respond. ‘Resolution.’ His necklace jitters. ‘That’s what you want, Taye.’

‘Is that one of the conexiones?’

‘No. But it’s what you’re seeking. Isn’t it?’ The crystalslab beeps to show we’ve arrived. I expected the Barrio to be deserted, but there are two silhouettes at the door to the apartment building. I should have sensed such familiar ánimos. ‘Hech, she’s insistent.’ As soon as the flycar hovers to the flypath, Leonor’s face appears behind the glass. Isabel’s lingers a few feet behind. ‘You’re about to meet my sister, it appears. And my presenciada.’

‘What’s that?’

‘A present person. Always around. Just too present right now.’

His facade snaps into place. He gestures the door open and holds a hand out to Leonor as if he wants to kiss hers. Leonor simply raises her eyebrows at him and turns to me. ‘We’ve been waiting for a while,’ she says. Why can’t I sense her?

Taye pivots to Isabel, ‘Firm to meet you, presenciada of Miguel.’ Her head cocks slightly when he uses the word. Her eyes are flickering, but I can see the delight in meeting a Velox. I realise I can’t sense her either. What is going on?

‘Well, here I am,’ I say. ‘We lost track of time. What’s wrong?’

Leonor’s eyes are ice. She’s trying to communicate without my magiary. It’s eerie relying only on body language. ‘So can we go inside?’ she asks.

Taye smiles beatifically and says, ‘Good night, sors. My vir.’ His ánimo reaches for me and his body twitches, but he just nods and steps back into the flycar.

‘What the *fuck*?’ Leonor hisses when the vehicle has pulled away. ‘I tried chiming you!’

‘You’re insane!’ says Isabel.

‘What is going on, hembras? Why can’t I sense you?’ Leonor lifts her coat pocket to show me a small cube pulsing with a blue light. ‘Is that a scrubber? Where did you get a scrubber from? And why would you need one?’

‘For the love of the Magon!’ says Leonor. She grips my arm and practically drags me inside, up the stairs and into our apartment. Isabel follows, the ridiculous parade of cargitas around her neck clacking as she walks.

Mamá is in the dining room, pacing around the table. The lightball above her is the only light on. It’s bathing the room in a sickly orange glow. ‘Thank poderes you’re alright!’ she says when she sees me. She squeezes me so tight I can barely breathe.

‘Of course I’m alright. Can someone please tell me what is going on?’ I ask.

Isabel is about to speak, but Leonor shushes her. She takes out the scrubber, taps a little screen, and places it on the table between us. ‘Bueno, it’ll should cover the whole room now.’

‘Why do we need a scrubber?’

Leonor steps towards me. Only now in the light do I see she’s shaking. Her eyes are dancing. ‘I told you stay away from him,’ she says in a low voice.

‘You suggested it,’ I reply. ‘Clearly something has happened. What?’

‘I can’t say exactly,’ she says. She glances at Mamá and Isabel. ‘I wish I could.’

‘And your mother got a message,’ says Isabel.

‘It’s nothing,’ says Mamá. Isabel reaches for Mamá’s crystalpod and refracts a crystalpod window above the table:

stop your depraved son from infecting his betters we will end your career you hate spewing bruja we will end you all

My blood is electric. ‘What the Magon? When did you get this?’

‘Just after 10,’ Mamá says. She pulls the screen until it’s inches from her face and regards it with more dignity than I could manage. Then she snaps it off.

‘Any idea who it came from?’

‘You’re the one who can answer that,’ says Leonor. ‘If you’d just listened to m—’

‘Me? How?’ Without the scrubber on, they can’t read the awful suspicion that pokes at my conscience. ‘Leonor, why do you have a scrubber? Those things are more expensive than this whole flat. Obviously, you got it from the SIB.’

Mamá looks at her daughter over her glasses. This must have been a heated debate before I arrived. ‘You’ve already told us you know something, mija,’ she says. ‘I’m sure taking that scrubber was already against the rules.’

‘Hech it,’ says Leonor. She raps the table with her knuckles. ‘What I can say is Taye is on the radar.’

‘And when someone is on the radar at the Societal Intelligence Bureau, it means they’re spying on him?’ asks Isabel.

Leonor looks like she wants to faint. ‘No, not spying exactly,’ she says. ‘We can’t spy on Societal citizens directly.’ Mamá gives a single, guttural laugh. Leonor ignores it. ‘You’ve worked out what I do there, right?’

‘You’re a professional cognigrapher,’ says Mamá. ‘You read trends in the pensado común.’

Leonor purses her lips. ‘Not just trends,’ she says almost under her breath.

‘What does that mean?’ Isabel asks, but I can see from her expression that she’s inferred what the rest of us have. ‘Fuck, Leonor!’

Mamá moves around the table until she’s right in front of her daughter, inches from her face. ‘Did you know about this before you got that job?’ she whispers with a ferocity that makes me shiver.

‘Claro, no,’ Leonor whines.

‘Then why have you stayed there for four years?’ she asks. Leonor stares back and grinds her teeth against her bottom lip. ‘I know my politics are in the extreme minority in this synod, but I raised you to think more critically than this! Have you been spying on the thoughtstreams of our people? Tapping into their brains?’

‘No, Mamá!’ Leonor’s voice rises, but she catches herself. ‘Poderes, I’ve told you enough! It takes huge resources just for one person to be monitored. You know how close we have to be to strangers to read them. From a distance, the tech and financial investment needed is prohibitive for any normal target.’ If I could sense Leonor right now, I’m sure the clash of moral obligations would be streaming. Now she has been warped. She thinks of the world between moral lines, or at least that has been the arc of her ánimo for years. She takes a few slow breaths before saying, ‘I noticed that Taye Velox’s thoughtstream had triggered the system.’

‘A thoughtstream can trigger a system?’ repeats Isabel. ‘So, if someone they’ve flagged thinks a certain thing, it gets picked up?’

‘It’s not that simple. You know it’s not, Isabel. Thoughtstreams are complicated data. It’s all fuzzy symbols. If I say much more, I’ll be in so much trouble. I’m in far enough as it is. Just understand that something happened tonight around seven’ – she scowls at me – ‘that was so intense it triggered an alert through the City’s pensado común. They put Guard on the case. The resources of a whole squadron are going after him.’

The watch. It has to be. When I sensed it, it must have caused one hech of a surge in the pensado común. Like a homing beacon.

‘And the threat your Mamá received?’ asks Isabel. Leonor turns to me. Isabel adds, ‘It has to be related.’ I grip the back of a chair to steady myself.

Mamá says, ‘I can handle threats. It’s not the first, won’t be the last.’

‘Patricia, you don’t have to be so brave. It’s not right.’

‘I know,’ Mamá replies. She throws her hands up to the lightball as if chastising a divinity she never believed in. ‘What’s more important is Miguel’s safety.’

‘Yes, but Patric—’

‘Miranda Lightly,’ I interject. The others turn to me. Isabel squints. ‘Miranda Lightly, she threatened me. And she threatened you in turn, Mamá. I thought she was exaggerating. I had no idea she’d actually send something like that, and so quickly. I’m sorry, Mamá.’ She swats my apology away.

‘There’s a Subcouncillor Lightly,’ says Isabel. ‘He’s Glouw’s deputy in the Preservist Caucus on the Subcouncil. Miranda must be his daughter.’

‘Why would Miranda Lightly threaten you? More specifically, how is Taye Velox involved?’ Leonor asks.

‘He wasn’t,’ I reply. ‘Not directly. Lightly is his fiancée, technically. She thought I was … infecting Taye with … unnatural ideas.’

Leonor swears. Mamá shakes her head and says, ‘This is why we don’t bond other Potents, until they learn how to treat us right. Miguel, I know you’re just innocently empathising with a man in need, but you’re playing with forces you do not understand.’

‘There’s no infection!’

‘You know Upperburbers don’t understand that. I thought this was just an empatistad for you. I wanted that for you.’ She adjusts her glasses and looks around as if answers are lying under the junk on the table. ‘Leonor, is the SIB going after Miguel now as well?’

Leonor shrugs. ‘I have no idea, truly,’ she says. ‘The flag was on Taye. I just wanted him to get away from Taye so he wasn’t caught up in whatever happens next.’

‘Why would the SIB even want to monitor him?’ I ask.

‘Politics, obviously. You know that, Miguel,’ replies Isabel. ‘He’s the son of the Kinetic Master who is also the leader of the Progressive Caucus. She’s Glouw’s arch rival. The SIB is an inter-synodic agency that reports directly to Glouw, so it’s one of the institutions the Pyrrhics, and by extension the Preservists Glouw leads, have control over. Glouw must be leveraging it to try to take Velox out. It’s all politics.’

‘All the more reason you should stay away,’ says Leonor. ‘And Mamá, you should sanitise your comments in lectures for a while.’

‘Hech no,’ Mamá says. ‘They’ll lay off as long as Miguel stays away from Taye. It’s all turf.’

‘Are you so sure, Patricia?’ asks Isabel.

Mamá doesn’t answer. We all look gaunt under the lightball, and exhausted. Leonor picks up the scrubber and rolls it between her palms. ‘What exactly did Velox tell you? Or feel?’ she asks. Under the scrubber’s field, I could lie without consequence, but I don’t even know if Taye has told me much. Whatever haunts him isn’t sensoricaptured in that watch. Even with the seersage-tinged clarity I have of his ánimo, even I don’t quite know what happened in Johannesburg, how Taye was involved and what drags at his mind. ‘He must have thought something very specific, very powerfully, to get flagged,’ Leonor continues. ‘Something deeply incriminating.’

‘I don’t know,’ I tell her. ‘Honestly, Leonor, we mostly just talked about Haiti.’

‘As soon as that scrubber is switched off, you know I’ll read if you’re lying.’

Mamá groans, ‘Leonor, enough.’ She’s looking at me with a mixture of worry and discernment. ‘I think our family has got itself involved in dangerous circles. What we all need to do is be careful and avoid the Veloxes and the Lightlys. Let the Upperburbers get caught up in

their contestations and power plays. We just do our jobs.' She looks at Leonor. 'Or at least approach our jobs with some semblance of moral clarity.'

Leonor glowers back. 'And maybe you should tone down the academic critiques. Don't put this all on us,' she says.

We settle into a tense resignation for a while. Mamá moves a hand against the back of a chair. Leonor yawns while she plays with the scrubber. Mamá asks her, 'Do we need that on? Are our thoughtstreams are being monitored?' There's just enough bitterness easing into her voice to suggest my mother and sister are heading for a confrontation over Leonor's work activities soon.

Leonor slowly places the device back on the table. 'If they are, I'll make sure they aren't noticed. I'll play the good revolutionary just for you, Mamá. Turn it off whenever you want. I'll take it back to work tomorrow.' She walks off with a final warning glance at me.

Mamá fiddles with the scrubber until she finds the off switch. The rush of emotionalia hits me so hard I stumble against the table, only barely catching myself. There's enough fear in me and the women in this apartment to cause my frame to shake. Isabel, whose sentience is similarly pitched to mine, pounds a fist on the table against the stream. I see Mamá looking at me intensely, her eyes glazing over in that characteristic tell. 'Mamá, please, not tonight. Let my thoughts just be,' I moan.

Her face flashes a loose smile. She rubs my arms. The gesture is soothing and maternal, but the physical contact will amplify her cogniscience. The commingling of comfort and probing is so Sensorial yet so invasive. She says, 'It looked like a consumidad to me when you were with him. I thought it was less, but he was your consumigo. You've never wanted one before. I assume you'll want to spend time with him, even after all this.'

'I don't know, Mamá,' I tell her, feeling her worry vibrate through me. She leaves with a yawn, gesturing to ignite the lightball along the passage.

Isabel's ánimo is vibrant with anxiety and concern, but I also caught the shimmer of jealousy when Mamá called Taye my consumigo. She moves towards the front door without saying anything. She'll sense my guilt, my care, my wanting her to be validated. We sense each other's ánimos with the simplicity of long familiarity, but maybe I'm too overcharged, too drained to give her a clear feelingstream. So, I follow her and give her words. 'I know you want intimañía again. I've sensed it. I understand why. The election has exhausted you, and now all this.' I wave my hand towards the dining room. 'I think – I think Taye absorbed so much of my emotional reserves that I just can't do intimañía right now. The emotional investment is too high.

Presencia is good. You're here, always here. And I'll be present for you as much as I can. That's always been our default, right?'

She taps a finger on the doorknob. 'It's alright, really,' she lies. 'We've moved between presencia and intimañía all our lives. I need more emotional depth right now, yes. When Taye's left your ánimo, maybe we can shift back to intimañía. It's only a few notches more intense than presencia, right?'

I hug her, which she responds to with enough energy to settle the friction. She's been a stable presence in my life, an uncomplicated conexión, and a refuge from abortive sacias and that one lascivanistad that ended in grief. As a good Sensorial, I should embrace all the varied conexiones, but unreturned connective needs are always frustrating to navigate. Once she's left, I wonder for a moment if I could use a bit of sacia, but even that seems exhausting.

I'm about to collapse on my bed when I notice a ping on my crystalpod. It's from Taye. Of course it is.

Miranda told me what they did

I'll huff up Miranda don't worry my vir

She's max out of control

I'll brace you up

There are flickers of his ánimo that jut at my nerves when I read the pings. But at this point, even that silvery Hightongue makes me want to expel him from my mind, my flesh, my life.

He must have been watching for the read receipt, because he pings again:

Seriously fra you're firm

You don't know how much you've helped

He deletes the last message, then types:

You're a good vir

Max firm fra

I can't help but feel the peril leaking from the shining font. I try a few variations of a response. I want him to know how his eruption in my life has placed me at risk and endangered my family. I want to him to know he's consumed my magiary and my thoughts and glued himself into my ánimo, dislodging Isabel. I want him to know how weary I am. But despite all that, the only thing my fingers type is:

Watch out Taye

Can't tell you why

But watch out

Service

Oliver dressed quickly, the physicality of clothing covering his sense of exposure. It was always that way with him. With Barotics generally. Happy to suggest sex and burst through it, but the aftermath was always escape. Maybe it was the bluster. All those explosions and vacuums they could cause with their magiaries. They liked the show of force, not the connection beneath.

My body was still purging itself of Oliver's ánimo. The physical contact had brought a stream of encumbered longing, much of which remained clumped in my flesh and frame. Why had I thought I needed this again?

Oliver's elbow hit the cupboard door. He rebounded and bumped into the bunkbed. 'You've got one of those spacious single-bed rooms, right?' I asked him.

He grunted in reply. I could tell from the irritation his ánimo puffed that he'd caught the inference. 'You free tomorrow morning?' he asked as he pulled his jersey over the chest I thought I craved.

'For what?'

He squirmed. I made him say it. 'This,' he whispered. 'Sassia.'

'Sacia,' I corrected. 'The C is pronounced "th".'

'Whatever you people call it.' He said it so easily, a comment cast aside as if declining a drink.

I wanted to launch into a tirade. I should have. I should have made him see that *this* wasn't just *this*. That I could want it too. But what use would it have served? The others came and went. The Aquial was fun, but his Service ended soon after we met. The other Barotic just wanted to assuage himself once. There was that encounter with the Pyrrhic, but I still wasn't sure what exactly we'd done under that cafeteria table that night. Only that I'd got burns. I'd have worried about getting a reputation on the base, but the networks that men find when they need physical exploration are reliably discreet, and I was Sensorial and weren't we all suspected of being slants?

Oliver didn't look expectant, but his feelings lurched towards yearning. He should have read about the Impotent metaphor of the closet. He'd be a case study.

'You know, I've never met a Barotic mach who wanted anything more than sacia.' His hands were on his hips now. 'Sure. Tomorrow's fine.'

He didn't know how to respond, so he nodded, lingered an excruciating moment, and left.

I'd have to thank Rudi, again, for giving me privacy in the room.

The base was getting dirty. Gunk and dust were collecting in corridor corners. I was sure the concrete – which was almost every surface in the deep-earth bunker – was a few shades darker than it had been. We'd been told the Grand Mastery had cut budgets on Service bases, but it could have been more strikes from the maintenance staff.

Rudi was waiting for me at the flybus platform. Pamphlets for promotion tracks into the Societal Intelligence Bureau were wafting through the disturbed air on either side of the tunnel. There was an old crystalsign, flickering now, displaying giddy posters for 'Societal Service: Social Cohesion for a Better Tomorrow' and 'Struggling to make sense of the Impotentate? Crystalcall a Sensorial Guía today!' Other second-halfers were starting to arrive too. Like me, they strolled. During our green months, we'd been so eager. Being allowed in the Impotentate was foreign and energising. Now, in the second half of our year-long Societal Service stints, we'd realised that we'd been trapped underground in a concrete cage, let out occasionally to watch the Impotentate behind glass and magial cloaking, forced to write moralistic essays on our observations of Impotent life, with no interaction with the people we were supposed to fear. It wasn't clear who we were serving. Even the Upperburbers grumbled and they got the nice assignments.

'You finish your Impotent ethics paper yet?' Rudi asked. He was absentmindedly crackling electricity between his thumb and forefinger. I'd told him many times that he did it in his sleep too.

'No,' I replied. 'I wanted to do more research on local Impotent approaches to homosexuality, but they're censoring our access to the Impotent internet again. And the Upperburbers aren't happy about my topic.'

Rudi bristled at how loudly I was talking. 'Yeah, write about Impotent slants, mach. That'll make them happy,' he said, looking at the Quantic girls next to us. 'I heard some of the Upperburbers got to see an Impotent shopping centre up close the other day. Lucky. Don't know who let them out for a private viewing.' He was watching the Quantics conjure little origami florets, which they were directing towards a Pyrrhic who incinerated them with a snap of her fingers. 'You know, Electrients should be Upperburbers. We can burn things too.' He was only half sarcastic.

'You know that Lightly girl? She said she ordered coffee from an Impotent,' said Bumona, strolling to us. 'Or got it delivered to her. The Kinetics have been going insane over it. Any idea how long today will take?'

'Three hours, I think,' replied Rudi. 'We're looking at religious cult centres.'

Bumona swore and squirted a few jets of water at grime near her shoe as the flybus grumbled up to the platform, scraping the walls slightly. The thing looked barely able to float, let alone fly out, invisible, across a major Impotent population centre. Harrion, the Service Guide, started corralling us onto the craft. ‘Mix up your synods, please,’ she whined, which prompted a few groans. She meant the Upperburbers and Midburbers and the few Lowburbers who made it here should mix, but it was too gauche to say so directly and too awkward to orchestrate onboard. Rudi and I naturally took seats next to each other. Electrient and Sensorial, both Midburb.

The rowdy Pyrrhic boys squeezed past us to the back seats as usual. Their hair was glowing blue. Oliver was two rows ahead. I shouldn’t have found his ánimo peaking through the sentido común to be so comforting.

The only Midburb–Lowburb pairing came at Harrion’s direction when she put one of the Cryonics next to Bumona in the seat in front of us. They smiled briefly but frost started forming on the Cryonic’s eyebrows, to which Bumona responded, ‘I can conjure more water to freeze all over your face, Faine.’ Faine pretended to be interested in something on her crystalpod.

We had to wait for an officer of the High Guard to board. The one on call today walked in tiredly and very much unimpressed with his assignment. He had a monstrous pyregun in a holster, just in case any of us thought about jumping out a window and making contact with live Impotents up top. It was an absurd idea, but the imagery worked. He gave the security briefing with the intonation of a suppressed yawn: ‘Alright, Service recruits, you’re reminded that our craft will use Luminent and Quantic technology to shield us from detection above ground. Any attempt to tamper with these systems or escape the vehicle will be deemed a treasonable action under the Societal Charter …’

Bumona was looking at someone behind Rudi and me. ‘I wonder if she’s going to order coffee for him?’ she asked. We followed her gaze to two Kinetics who were talking in the mix of awkwardness and gushiness of fresh flirting. The girl had to be Lightly.

‘How could she actually talk to a real Impotent? Isn’t that the worst thing possible?’ Rudi asked.

‘Fuck yes,’ said Bumona. ‘They don’t talk to Impotents. I heard she just used one of those ubers the Impotents have on their internets. Gets stuff delivered to some location above ground and bribes the Guard to fetch it for her without any Impotents seeing anything. The Upperburbers do it all the time. There are three Quantics on my corridor. Stuff often appears in their rooms that isn’t Societal. If any of us tried that, we’d be in jail for the rest of our lives.’ I

wondered how Bumona and my presenciada Isabel would get along. They saw inequality with the same assiduous fury, even if neither knew how to stand up to it or remember the people consigned to the classes beneath. True enough, Bumona was looking remarkably uncomfortable next to Faine.

'Are you sure it's Impotent stuff they get? There's no way they're breaching the Charter with little bribes to the Guard,' Rudi said as the officer finished the briefing without seeming too worried that no one had paid attention. The first time we'd heard it had scared us out of our minds – or the minds of the non-Upperburbers at least.

'It's suspicious stuff, Rudi. Though the scapesage they use sometimes smells a little too potent to be legal. You know who he is, right?' She nodded to the boy with Lightly. It looked like her hair was kineticking around his face, octopus-like. I couldn't tell if he was doing it or she was.

'Taye Velox. Plenipotentiary Velox's son,' I replied.

'I heard he can lift a flybus with his magiary,' said Rudi. 'I'd like to see him try.'

'He gets it from his mother. That woman is a hero,' says Bumona.

'Didn't you say just yesterday that the Progressives are anti-Midburb elites masquerading as class dismantlers?' I asked.

Bumona rolled her eyes. 'Yes, obviously they are, Miguel. Doesn't mean Niobe Velox herself isn't inspirational. If she gets the leadership of the Progressive Caucus, just imagine what she could do. A clear Subcouncil majority would put just the right pressure on Glouw in the Grand Council.'

'Which would change everything, right?' She pretended not to have heard me.

'Isn't she Kinetic?' asked Rudi.

Bumona's eyes narrowed. 'Yes, Rudi. She's the Master of the Kinetic Synod. Keep up.'

'So, why would a Kinetic lead the Progs? And why would they want a Kinetic to lead them? Don't they want to get rid of the hierarchy of the synods? You know, stop the Upperburbers getting all the good jobs and stuff?'

'Exactly. A Kinetic would have more authority to dismantle the system. She's the strategic choice, if compromised by her claims to high class.'

The windows started glowing purple. The flybus revved and swayed, gathered speed and flew directly into the tunnel's wall, shuddering slightly as the craft's quantic field phased us through the earth.

Rudi asked under his breath so Bumona couldn't hear, 'What about Taye Velox?'

‘What about him?’ I asked, watching the magial sparks just beyond the window. I was always uneasy with how close we were to solid rock and how weird it was to be travelling through it like a knife through butter. The sentido had thickened slightly, as it always did – everyone worried the quantic field would fail one day and fuse us into the subterranean soil in an instant.

‘Would you slant him?’

‘Do you have to use that word?’

‘Everyone uses it except you lot.’

‘Taye Velox is Kinetic,’ I said.

‘So?’

‘So, Kinetic men are the last people to want sacia with other men. Believe me.’

‘Electrients too,’ Rudi said. I wished he’d find the courage to ask what he really wanted to ask. His ánimo had been curling towards me for months, throbbing with a raw kind of sed that thrilled me in spurts and flutters, but he seemed utterly incapable of knowing his own feelings. ‘I like how the Impotents do things. They just accept who people are. No synods, no real boundaries like we have.’ He nodded at the wisdom of his analysis, which was fabulously wrong but sweet in his own way.

The flybus gave a final rattle before sunlight blinded the cabin, prompting several groans. A faint blue bubblefield snapped in place a few inches from the chassis’s edge, making the flybus invisible to the Impotents and their technology. Harrion and the Guardsman tapped through several crystalslab screens to check the bubblefield was working before the driver was allowed to lift us hundreds of feet above the city the Impotents called Johannesburg. I always felt simultaneously discreet and intrusive out here. We were gods and spies.

‘Right, everyone,’ said Harrion, projecting her voice over the tip of her crystalpod. ‘We’ll be flying over Impotent religious structures today, noting in particular the iconography that has its roots in the magiphobia of the Purges. Today is Sunday, which is considered a holy day for Impotents of the Christist cult. We’ll also be observing differences between their economic and racial groups.’ The flybus began its surveillance of buildings Harrion claimed were centres of magiphobic cultic practice, but no one was listening. The fascination with seeing live Impotents had left months ago. We’d been in this same flybus multiple times each week, noting the same areas of urban development, the Impotent upper classes ensconced in the suburbs of Johannesburg, the working classes further out in what the locals called townships. We’d seen how these Impotents divided themselves into groups based on ancestry and accumulated

resources. Frankly, it didn't strike us as much different from the Society of the Potent. We could churn out pithy essays to fulfil requirements. All it took was telling the guides how right the Society always was to flee from these Impotents three centuries years ago. Who would want to live among them anyway?

Rudi tried typing the rudiments of an essay on his crystalpod, but he dozed off quickly. Bumona tossed globules of water between her hands as she finally got into whispered conversation with Faine. Harrion gave up on the lecture after we'd flown yet again over the city centre, a scene I recognised well by now.

The flybus was quiet. Except for Taye Velox. He'd ended up in the seat behind me at some point, and he was gazing out at the skyline below. He had a thick silver necklace that was swirling slowly around his neck. Kinetics did that often, I'd noticed. He was sitting close, but his ánimo was as murky as the metallic casing on that hovering chain.

I was feeling the paradox of the Societal Service again. Potents from all synods were thrown together in a pretence of social cohesion, only for the barriers of the Magial Isle to reassert themselves an ocean away, above a foreign, apparently hostile Impotent territory.

'Can I ask you a question, Velox?'

It was Rudi. Woken up and apparently confident to engage in conversation with the Upperburb princeling. Velox smiled and nodded.

'Are your ancestors from down there?'

Velox didn't seem offended. He looked obliquely at me just as I let slip an embarrassed grimace. He nudged Rudi's shoulder affably. 'Unlikely, vir,' he said. 'Mostly European Potents were given passage to the Magial Isle during the Great Retreat, with some exceptions but not from around here.' He looked at me and the corner of his lip flicked. 'Your wittance of history is decent,' he told me. 'From what I've vizzed. You voyed to university fore starting your Service, verit?'

His Hightongue scraped. I was surprised he'd noticed me at all. 'My mother's a philosophy lecturer,' I said. 'Can't help learning about history. And yes, I studied first.'

He smiled as if we'd discovered a bond. 'Academics before indoctrination,' he said. I wondered if his mother would call it that. He leaned towards Rudi again. Now I saw arrogance, packaged in oily chumminess. 'The Society didn't consider black Potents to be real Potents until recently, you wit. They cogged we were just practising trickery and dark arts.'

Rudi's stare signalled he didn't know. I noticed Velox was looking at me again. Did he dispense historical anecdotes often? Maybe it made him feel better about his wealth and station.

‘The European Potents who lived in South Africa back in the 19th century – right at the height of the Great Retreat – veritly weren’t interested in finding fellow Potents among the native peoples,’ he continued. ‘And the black Potents from around the world who did make it to the Magial Isle during the Retreat were mostly enslaved and their history wasn’t recorded or important, so very few of us wit where we come from.’

Rudi’s horror made me jittery. But he tried to cover it with a nod and a nervous chuckle. ‘They don’t teach us that at school. Or here,’ he said.

Velox seemed satisfied. ‘That’s what happens when certain synods control the flow of information. No one wants to cog that our forefathers couldn’t viz the Potency in every Potent. That would make us monsters like the Impotents who wanted to purge us from the earth, just for being different.’

‘Racial prejudice among Potent elites in the Retreat *is* well documented, if you talk to the right people in the right synods,’ I said under my breath. Velox’s eyes gleamed.

The flybus was starting to descend. Rudi picked up his crystalpod, probably trying to avoid further awkward conversation with a Kinetic know-it-all. Velox returned to gazing out the window. When the flybus veered, reactivated the quantic drive and plunged into the surface, Velox leaned towards me in the same faux-friendly manner he’d used with Rudi. ‘What do you cog about the max bit? The narrative they push on us out here. The story we’re meant to cred aft “doing” our “Societal Service” and vizzing Impotents. You obbed a degree fore Service. What do you cog about this?’

He was close enough that I could start to sense embers of his ánimo, but his intention was difficult to work out. ‘You’re a Kinetic, Velox,’ I told him. ‘You can’t expect me to give you a straight answer.’

He laughed and flicked his hand against my arm as if we’d shared some kind of camaraderie, but then his arm jerked away, forcing him to twist from me. One of the Kinetic girls was trying to kinetick him to face her. Velox found this hilarious and pursued her, which, as we reached the flybus platform deep underground, resulted in some very floaty snuggling.

‘I wonder what airborne sex is like with Kinetics,’ Rudi said an hour later when I sat opposite him in the base’s cafeteria. He was cracking electricity between his fingers, letting little tendrils singe the edges of the potatoes on his plate. ‘Does everything float? Do they have to concentrate on it or does the flying just happen?’

‘Most can’t move anything heavy, right? And it’s better than sex with a Barotic, I’m sure,’ I said, but Rudi was lost in his imagination.

Bumona’s excited voice appeared before she sat down next to Rudi. ‘So Faine has contacts with the Lowburbers who clean SIB agents’ rooms,’ she said, filling Rudi’s glass with water from her fingers. He looked at me as if she’d expressed breastmilk for him to drink. ‘She says the Cairo base was closed.’

‘Just the Societal Service or the SIB as well?’ I asked.

She leaned over and lowered her voice. ‘The whole base. They found out about it here because some of the SIB agents were transferred to us. The Service recruits were all sent home. Can you imagine?’

‘Leaving this conscription camp? Yes, I can imagine it, Bumona,’ I replied.

She waved my comment away with her hand. ‘That’s the fifth base in Africa they’ve shut now. It’s just Marrakech, Brazzaville and us left. I wish they’d let us check the news. What are they afraid we’ll find out?’ Her eyes were on the table at the far end of the hall where the SIB agents sat for lunch. Their gleaming brooches and older faces made them seem removed from us recruits. I wondered how much my sister knew, but she was an ocean away on the Isle, completing her final training for the Bureau in cognigraphy. I doubted she’d need to know much about what was happening in the internal politics of the Service. ‘It looks like the Grand Master wants to close every base she can out here.’

‘The Cairo base was big, wasn’t it?’

‘And one of the oldest. Do you know how much magial history there is in Egypt? Thousands and thousands of years. I always thought the SIB spent half their time in Cairo tracking down ancient magialised artefacts getting lost in Impotent markets. Now they’re done. Magium will be running loose in the Impotentate.’ She shook her head at the horror of her prediction. Her sincerity ground at my nerves.

‘Maybe something happened,’ said Rudi. ‘A breach? If the Upperburbers get away with smuggling Impotent stuff onto our secret bases, who knows what else is going on?’

‘Maybe,’ said Bumona, looking around like the barely adult recruits were suspects. ‘Maybe we should enjoy seeing the Impotentate while we can. I was counting on a few more excursions to observe the class politics up there. My paper needs detail on how their middle classes organise against their elites.’

‘They’ll fail you just for choosing that topic,’ said Rudi.

‘Harrion won’t. She’ll understand. You can’t tell me the Upperburbers don’t see how the Impotent elites are just as precariously placed as ours.’

As if to reinforce the point, Taye Velox had just approached a nearby table of Pyhrrics and Quantics, floating his tray before him ostentatiously. ‘There’s a mach whose family was from the middle classes and became elite,’ said Rudi. His ánimo flashed longingly for a second, but retreated just as quickly. He didn’t meet my eyes.

‘Just his mother,’ said Bumona. ‘She was born into a Barotic family but his father is a pureblood Kinetic.’

‘I wonder if the other Kinetics treat him differently because he looks so different. Don’t they obsess over bloodlines?’ said Rudi, his ánimo pulling at strands of recognition in someone who couldn’t be more beyond our grasp.

Bumona, oblivious to Rudi’s mask, responded, ‘Once they discover powerful kinetickry in someone, they incorporate it and breed it into the gene pool. They’re so worried their rare magiary might disappear genetically.’ She switched to complaining about the Cryonic cooling system being faulty near her dormitory. Rudi nodded along casually, but his feelingstream kept pulling me towards the men around us, desiring and recoiling in ebbs and flows. I told them I needed to dose up on inhibidor and walked out the cafeteria, passing Velox’s table on the way. He was in a snappy, whispered conversation with a glowing-bearded Pyrrhic.

I was nearing the overdose limit when Oliver appeared at my dorm door, looking skittish and blustery. ‘You said tomorrow morning,’ I told him, grateful for the inhibidor numbing me from his ánimo. He shrugged. ‘I’m not a button you get to press whenever you want sex.’

‘But you like it when I do,’ he whispered.

I wondered if Rudi’s ánimo had started to settle in me, because I was sure it was only his desire that coloured the craving I felt towards Oliver’s body. But just as I was about to let him inside, he saw something to his left and straightened at once, stepping back and scratching the back of his head. He nodded as if we’d merely greeted each other and sauntered away with barely restrained casualness.

I stepped out to see what had spooked him. Yet again, Taye Velox. He was walking down the long corridor, a hand in one pocket, his head unusually bowed, almost at my door by now.

He only noticed me when he was a few yards away. His posture adjusted at once, his face finding an instant, affable smile, even if it looked more strained that I’d seen before. The inhibidor was blocking his ánimo, but I was sure there was something angry fuzzing just at the

boundaries of my range. ‘Vidente, my vir,’ he said. I was surprised he knew my name. ‘Do you wit which dorm is Fume’s?’ I pointed to the fourth door across. He clasped my shoulder in gratitude.

‘Velox,’ I called just as he turned away. ‘Did you hear the Grand Mastery closed the Cairo base?’

His eyebrows rose. ‘They did? Bono, that’s exterious.’

‘Couldn’t have been a breach, right?’

He nodded at something only he could see. ‘Why would any Potent breach the Charter, my vir?’

‘You Upperburbers seem to have ways of getting Impotent artefacts down here.’

His smile didn’t crack. ‘The Guard are the only ones allowed outside of the base and outside the flycars. With max strict rules about never interacting with any actual Impotents ever.’

‘Isn’t using Impotent technology to order things from them a kind of interaction with actual Impotents?’ I asked.

He shook his head slowly, his eyes sparkling. ‘Ye virs make some exterious conspiracy theories about what we Upperburbers get up to down here. The Charter applies just as much to us too, you wit. Everybit we do on the base, everybit even the SIB does is max secret. The Impotents have no idea we exist or that we’re here, watching from their skies.’

‘You asked me earlier what I thought about this place, the Societal Service.’

He moved closer. ‘You dicted I was a Kinetic, so you wouldn’t dict me.’ I couldn’t tell if he was amused or bored.

I wondered if he could speak Midtongue, why neither of us was willing to be the first to code switch. Not that many Upperburbers and Midburbers spoke much at the base. ‘I just think the result isn’t to make us believe the Impotents are as bad as our history says they are. Showing them to us makes them seem more human.’

‘Bold view,’ he said, stepping away to signal the conversation was ending. ‘They are human. Doesn’t mean we should interact with them, verit?’

His eyes were distant. I couldn’t work out if he seemed aloof because of how gloriously out of my social world he was, or because of something in him that lifted him from the world.

I pinged Oliver that he could come back, but he didn’t respond. He probably wouldn’t return at all. They often didn’t.

I took a final swig of inhibidor and traipsed through the bleak grey corridors back to the cafeteria, counting the days until my service would end and the Impotentate could fade from my

worries, along with these weird interactions with Potent men whose synodic upbringing made them seem, at times, more alien than the people ten miles above me.

Part II

Chapter 10

Leonor and Mamá have entered one of their telepathic spats. They're perfectly amicable in words and gestures, pleasant at dinner, smiling when they pass each other in the forecourt, hugging and smiling as necessary, but the feelingstream crossfire is tetchy. My magiary is too tuned to emotions to understand the content of the thoughtstreams, but I feel the volleys as heat and blades through the air. This could last months. They won't resolve it through debate, cognisciently or otherwise: Mamá cannot accept Leonor's complicity in the 'mental plunder of innocent Potents', and Leonor thinks our mother is too rigid in her activism, too unwilling to accept the compromises of Sensoriality in Upperburb institutions. At least Mamá doesn't rope me into the conflict. Leonor tries – frequently. She corners me in the kitchen just after I've printed wakesage or inserts herself between Isabel and me when we're watching election coverage or sends unhinged pings with precise suggestions on how I might help our mother see reason. I stay away, not just because I don't want to be involved, but because a moment of weakness around them will open my experiences with Taye – the watch, the crime it suggests, the conexión I'm struggling to explain away. Isabel is safer. She senses the chaos in me, lets me sense her presence and gives me permission to talk about anything else.

This isn't difficult. The election is on Sunday. The insight she's gained into Upperburb politics from Leonor's revelation and what she can glean from my association with Taye have made her strangely nihilistic. She watches hours of footage of Niobe Velox campaigning in Lowburb communities, nods, catches herself and comments to whoever is near that no one is worthy of anything anymore. Her Bienoyente for Subcouncil Barrio 3 pin is gone. The necklaces of cargitas have been pared back to a single strand. Sensing she could spiral, I drag her to a wakesage brewery on Saturday morning. She spends the whole flybusride scrolling through seerscopes, some of them from quite spurious sources. I order her a double shot with enough sugar to start a confectionary. She finds a booth by the window and sips morosely.

'You usually love these Midburb–Upperburb areas,' I say. She certainly fits in here. I notice her watching a Cryonic doing maintenance on a cooling unit across the street. She's trying to witness the invisible hierarchies.

‘I’m sorry I’ve been giving you sad feelingstreams,’ she says. Her expression stiffens when a Pyrrhic couple walks into the store. The girl’s jacket has ‘GLOUW FOREVER SYNOD FOREVER’ emblazoned – in literal flames – across the back.

‘It’s what presenciados are for,’ I reply.

She gives me a raised eyebrow, knowing I sense my own doubt. She nods to the room, ‘Look at them. Acting as if everything is normal, like their leader isn’t mining their thoughts.’

‘Leonor wouldn’t want us to talk about that in public. And she didn’t say it was mining.’

She shakes her head. ‘I know. I know. I’m just reckoning with the reality that the Preservists are even more morally depraved than I thought. I was campaigning for a caucus that I thought might actually do something, you know? Dismantle the synods, or just make things fairer. Let areas like this be the norm. How can the Progressives manage that if Frederika Glouw has captured the state?’

‘I’ve always wondered how it was that being exposed to my Mamá didn’t make you cynical.’

‘She pushes me,’ Isabel says with a small smile. ‘That’s why she’s such a good padralta for me. I love her insanely, but I didn’t want to give her my optimism. Still don’t.’

‘You know areas like this are for bourgeois Midburbers and the Upperburbers who like to think they’re charitable, right? You know our synod doesn’t want real integration. Even Mamá, when her son is involved with one these types.’

‘Involved?’ Isabel mutters into her mug. Her ánimo is building resentment at her surroundings, even though there’s a longing to live here. She doesn’t realise a certain Velox lives near here too. ‘You’re right. The only Lowburbers here are behind the counter. Taye?’ she asks, sensing my ánimo’s jolt at a ping from him. ‘Your mother and sister think you’ve stopped talking to him.’

‘It’s not talking, exactly,’ I say, squinting. He wants to see me at the Needle. Today. I tell him I’m busy campaigning for his mother, which isn’t a full lie.

‘You’re in thrall,’ Isabel whispers, gently but not without some caustic heat.

I stare at his reply:

I need you

It shines for a second before the font rearranges. ‘Might’ appears before ‘need’ now. I say to Isabel, ‘If Taye was Sensorial, I’d know what this conexión is. He’s so cryptic. And layered. But also simple.’

She's keeping her gaze outside, feigning a lightness to the topic that her feelings don't echo. 'If he was Sensorial, what conexión would you want from him?' She'll know I caught that little tug of envy, and the attempt to assuage it. I'm weary of talking about this with her. We've always been candid, regardless of the form of conexión we're inhabiting, but Taye has introduced a dynamic that has dislodged her sense of my feeling.

Maybe later, like 3, I type. I sigh slowly.

There's a Kinetic in the booth behind Leonor. Her necklace is swirling in an elegant motion. Even here, in an area fairly Upperburb in class and taste, she sticks out, too graceful and aristocratic. I wonder if the Pyrrhic couple feels kinship or distance. 'If he was Sensorial,' I continue, 'I'd know what he wanted too. That's what makes Sensorial bonding easier. You both sense or read what the other wants and you negotiate from there.'

'Alright, but let's say he wanted the same as you, exactly the same. What would you want from him in that case?' She's stirring even though she hasn't added anything to her brew. 'You've never craved anything but the occasional sacia with good-looking men, maybe some lascivanistad. Apart from me and your blood family, you've never wanted much more from people, Sensorial or otherwise. You've kept close, emotive and intimate conexiones to a minimum. And to women. Three of them. Until this.'

When Daniel comes, just dict yes

I wiggle my jaw.

What??? Who? I ask Taye.

'You're feeling entangled,' says Isabel.

'I've never felt a consumidad, but I've …'

My mother's secretary

'Miguel?'

I look up. She's scowling at my crystalpod as if it were reeking a foul odour. I check the ping chain. His typing is erratic. 'You said it's consumidad? I've sensed consumidad in others, Isabel. That's close to what this feels like, I think. Emotionally consuming. His ánimo overwhelms the fibres in my body. I've never sensed anyone like that. I don't know how to handle that.'

'It's not just that,' she says, finishing her drink. 'You're drawn to it too. I can sense it, presenciado. You just need to decide if it's consumidad or maybe a conexión more physically connective.' Now her envy is piquant. Consumidad is far, far more intense than the intimañía she and I have at times.

‘They’re stuck on their opposite-gender pairings,’ I say. ‘And I haven’t sensed any real craving in him for me in a physical sense.’

She throws up her hands in mock tribute. ‘But is it what you want? I mean, he’s objectively fuckable.’ She’s trying to trigger the right emotional reaction so she can sense it and declare victory, or bathe in the sensation vicariously. I don’t know which would be worse.

Bono you don’t have to gleamly

Veritly he won’t give you an option

I snap the power off and flip the screen on its back with enough force to nearly shatter the glass. Isabel is stroking the rim of her empty mug. ‘I brought you here to help you get out of your head. Restore your political edge. Leonor’s revelation has thrown you,’ I say.

She laughs darkly. ‘Are you sure he isn’t messing with your head?’

‘That would be a perfect consumidad, wouldn’t?’

She’s distracted by a commotion outside. ‘Is that a Progressive convoy? Figures this would be the right area.’

The airlane traffic is jammed with flycars and flybuses flashing magenta flags. Hooters are blaring out at different pitches, echoing off the buildings in this narrow streetlevel. The Pyrrhics in the brewery instantly flash their hair in fiery blue. An amplified voice is trying to make itself heard above the riot, but all I can get is ‘FREEDOM!’ and something like ‘DISRUPT … SYNOD … IMBALANCE’. The Guard presence has increased too. Officers are moving along the flypath in their gold uniforms, pushing pedestrians away from the mass. There must be some high-ranking Subcouncillors in the motorcade.

The Pyrrhic couple I’d noticed earlier has moved to the window, only yards away from us. The man’s hair is sizzling in orange and smoke. ‘Listen to them!’ he huffs. The Kinetic woman rolls her eyes. ‘Abolish the synods and our cultures would obb away sliply!’ Isabel and I stiffen at the agita broiling through the sentido común. She gives me a look of thrill and nervousness. ‘Where’s the purr? She should campaign herself out here!’

His companion is sipping a massive latte. Her eyebrows flutter in blue and orange as she says, ‘She’s too scared to dict out in public, gleamly, Nate.’

Her eyes find Isabel and me and she furrows her brows. Isabel mutters, ‘Struggling to identify us ethnically, is she?’

There’s a vibrant cheer from the gathering crowd outside, many of whom have pink shirts and are holding up crystalpods to refract huge images of a cheery, friendly Niobe Velox’s face.

The Pyrrhic man has found the Kinetic. In an attempt at assumed Upperburb solidarity, he asks, gesturing at nothing, ‘Ye don’t cog she’ll let you keep your living standards if the Progs hurl up the synods, do ye?’

Her necklace furls slowly when she replies, looking at her cup, ‘Most Kinetics don’t vote Progressive, vir. Never will.’ He nods suavely. ‘The Progs have had nil real power on the Subcouncil. They only became official opposition because the Effectivists bottomed out at the last election. But to obb a majority? Exterious idea.’

‘She’ll summon up the Lowburb vote, gleamly, and those Barotics of hers,’ says the Pyrrhic woman. ‘We can comp that, verit? I just hope the other Midburbers viz the privileges the status quo has given them. Ye must love having your synod’s master leading a caucus that would destroy her own synod.’

Isabel wants to interject, but I send a warning feeling to stop her and shake my head. She pretends to be focused on the crowd. The centre of the convoy is passing beside us now. The cheers and jeers are almost equal. The Pyrrhic couple smiles at the Kinetic in satisfaction that the Upperburbers aren’t about to annihilate themselves.

Isabel seems to be enjoying herself for the first time in a while. ‘I needed some political conflict, even if I’m doubting that lot is the right vessel,’ she sighs. ‘You were right.’ Her eyes are following something beyond my shoulder. A ripple of anxious curiosity makes me turn just in time to see a tall man with remarkably coiffured black hair glide right up to our table. A Kinetic necklace – thin silver – pumps at his neck like a metallic heartbeat and there’s a distinctive brooch, gold loop with a palm in the middle, on his breast. The insignia of the Kinetic Mastery.

‘Señor Vidente,’ he says – stating, not asking. ‘My name is Daniel Springform. I’m the private secretary for Plenipotentiary Velox.’ Isabel’s face snaps to me when she senses the seizure of my nerves. ‘Her Magnificence dicts for your presence at the Needle.’ He’s speaking softly, but there’s an aura to the man that even the customers around us sense. The cut of his suit is the same as many I saw on Kinetic men at Club Pique: dark, clean-lined, almost unremarkable but suggestive of expense. The Kinetic woman is the only one who seems unconcerned by this sudden presence.

For a moment, I wonder if I should refuse. I think I trust Taye, or at the least I trust the bend of his feelings and the need he’s allowed himself to feel of me. But why would Niobe Velox send her private secretary to fetch me? And how did he know I was here? She probably

hires people with enough kinetickry to restrain and move a human body. Taye said I wouldn't be given an option.

Springform is giving me an impatient look that crumbles my confidence. He gestures to the door.

I begin to apologise to Isabel, but she interrupts, 'It's fine. I'll join this convoy.' Her ánimo sparkles with worry and excitement. She should be more concerned.

As soon as I stand up to follow Daniel out the brewery, I see the Kinetic woman move to trail me. I feel the slightest tugging at my back, like the air is pushing me. Daniel moves quickly, darting between Progressive supporters who are now moving in the opposite direction to keep up with the procession, and slipping between Preservist supporters almost too smoothly. True enough, I see some of their bodies being kineticked right out of our way. The woman is close enough behind me that I can smell the musk of her perfume.

Daniel stops at the streetgap edge and says something into his crystalpod to let a dark flycar, windows completely tinted, lift from the convoy to meet us. When the door melts from the gleaming exterior, he asks me to board as if I still have any choices left.

The interior is plush, a ring of black leather. Daniel immediately is occupied in a crystalpod call, speaking in rapid, slippery Hightongue. 'Dovetry and I are in voy. We'll obb juxt in time.'

Dovetry swipes at the crystalslab to set the flycar moving. We pull against the convoy and dart upwards towards the top streetlevel. A glint of gold reveals a Guard flycar moving to escort us. With that signal, my room for manoeuvre has vanished completely.

'May I ask why Plenipotentiary Velox has asked to see me?' I ask Dovetry.

She smiles smoothly and shakes her head. 'I wouldn't wit,' she says.

My crystalpod vibrates. I wonder for a second if I should ask permission to look at it, but when she takes out her own device, I chance a look.

Thank you fratelle

I owe you again

I can't help feeling the darkened windows are thick and heavy.

Chapter 11

I've never entered the Needle from the top streetlevel. I've always seen from below the building's tip, a spike of gold with a magial beam piercing into the sky, meeting the Bubblefield hundreds of feet above, but now, brought by Kinetic functionaries in a gilded flycar, I see the landmark so close I can detect the cracks in the concrete and the centuries of decay that distort the metal's finish. I'm struck by the humanness of the Society's elite. They stretch after leaving their flycars and scratch and laugh. Despite that, I've possibly never been in so much danger. Springform and Dovetry sit with aristocratic ease. They don't need to shout or coerce to keep me under control. They're power incarnate, no matter how much critique of their social position my mother has pumped into me, accurately or not.

I've given up working out what the hech is going on. I'm led without word or apparent concern onto the asphalt and ushered past a security checkpoint without being searched. Many of the Guard have Kinetic necklaces, I notice. A few others blur and shimmer in the light – Luminents. It's jarring seeing so many Upperburb Guardspeople, but this must be the reality up here. I sense scrubbers beyond that point, which leaves me at once relieved and blinded. Then there's a series of marbled corridors, liftways and bridges – none of which are familiar to me. The art and furniture and statuary up here are opulent and very Euro-Potent. There are paintings and friezes of heroic scenes, Britons and Celts and Italians and Germans in the military garb of the Societal Guard with her arms around hapless Potents who flee the furious faces and pitchforks of Impotents. It's gauche and subjective and so Upperburb. When we stop at last, I actually gasp. Dovetry sighs like I'm a silly child in awe of the mundane. I've been in this atrium before, of course I have, but I've never climbed those granite steps before those massive, ancient, brass-rimmed doors, and I have nothing near the qualifications or the gumption to go inside, let alone the right heritage.

Springform, who until now has been on crystalcalls almost continuously, looks me in the eyes for the first time since the brewery. I think I preferred when his attention wasn't on me. 'You will be let inwise,' he says, nodding to the doors behind him. 'Sit on the appellant bench, juxt the Kinetic counsel. You should wit where that is.' I realise I'm making pathetic breathing sounds. Dovetry's necklace jitters. 'You've been recorded on the case paperwork as Taye

Velox's attorney under our synod. If asked if this is verit, dict yes. That is all you need to do. The Attorney for the Synod will dict on your behalf. Simply viz and glimmer attentive.'

I'm trying to hide the convulsions my stomach has decided to explore. Surely Daniel can see the panic in my eyes, the blanching in my skin, the omnifuckery of what he's suggesting? 'I … you want me to do *what*?'

He's clicking his fingers towards someone behind me. 'Sit quietly and dict you're Taye's attorney. Simple.' A Kinetic approaches us with red cloth in his hands. 'You are a practising lawyer, verit?'

'For exit appeals!' I spit. 'Not for the High Tribunal! I haven't been admitted to that bar. They don't admit people like me.'

'Plenipotentiary Sabrador registered you on the bar a few minutes ago. I cred this is the verit garb.' He floats the cloth before me. It's a robe. Blood-red velvet, with a gold trim the exact hue of raw magium. Above the right breast is a gold brooch, a slender wand tilted towards the lowest side of a scale.

My eyes are trying to find an escape route. There's the staircase that leads down to where Miranda Lightly confronted me the other day. I know that area. I could just run over there, right? Somehow, incredibly, that terrifying moment with Taye's fiancée seems so much safer than this.

Dovetry's reading a ping on her crystalpod. 'They've started,' she says to Daniel. I don't move. I'm stunned, indecisive, overthinking. She points to the doors, but I stare back stupidly. She flicks her hand and the robe drapes over my shoulders. I struggle to work out how my arms should go through the sleeves. I fumble long enough for her to wave again, this time sending me jogging forward. I almost trip onto the staircase. My vision is spotty. I don't know what is happening, what I can do, why I'm here, what right I have to be walking up these vaunted steps to the High Tribunal of the Society. It should have been the apex of my career to enter that chamber as a barred attorney.

I look behind to see Dovetry about to kinetick me further, but my legs find the movement my mind won't give them. A Guardswoman, donning the formal red uniform of the Judiciary, must have been expecting me, because she immediately pushes the doors open. They creak and grumble almost in protest.

The chamber within is tall, breathtakingly so. My sight is drawn instantly to the stain-glass cupola far above. Beams of coloured light dance below it in the Luminent style. My mind is registering each stimulus as foreign, a decentring – the intensity and the nervous shock freezing

me. My hands pull the lapels of the robe tight, just as I would in the Exit Appeals Court. Part of me wants to laugh at the ridiculousness of that habit. Nothing about this is habitual.

There's a Guardsman at the inside entranceway. His hand brushes the pyregun at his hip. That's all I need to straighten myself and look as if I'm supposed to be here. I walk with as much dignity as I can assume down the aisle, past pews, all empty, until I reach the front row. Appellants are on the left, I assume. A woman resembling a robed ostrich with an obsidian, still-hovering necklace, is at the bench's pulpit. Next to her, a Kinetic barely older than me shifts to give me space. My body sits. My mind reels. What in the name of the Magon am I doing here?

On the other end of the bench is a figure my body expects to sense, but the scrubbers give me only a sanitary look. Taye. He's hunched over, holding his head in his hands. He sees me and tries to smile, but his charisma collapses in the attempt. I gesture to ask what's going on, but he only shakes his head, then clasps his hands together in a token of gratitude.

Thirteen justices are seated on the dais before us, each wearing the gold-cream robes of the supreme judiciary, each donning a brooch that signifies the synod they represent. The Kinetic at the pulpit seems familiar, now that I think of it. She's the Attorney of the Kinetic Synod. I've seen her at the Needle, always walking in levels above me, never deigning to involve herself in cases I work. Her counterpart I definitely know: the viper-like Grand Attorney of the Society. He's at his own pulpit to our right at the respondents' bench and rapping his fingers against the wood. His skin stretches and supples in the Luminent way.

Apart from counsel, the justices and a few Guard, the room is deserted. Aren't cases before the High Tribunal usually open to the public? I've seen videos of the cases, studied them. Something is wrong.

A banging sound snaps my attention to the Pyrrhic at the centre of the justices. Natalie Fyres, the Grand Justice of the Society. There's a strand of blue-hot hair tied into a bun behind her. 'Bono, seal the chamber again. Max shut!' she calls. There are irate voices beyond the doors. Some of the justices curse. 'I dicted seal the chamber, Guardsmen,' Fyres repeats, the flowing stripe of hair now white and smoking. The doors clammer and groan and there are more shouts. Fyres raps the gavel several times, but it's no use. 'Your Magnificences cannot be here. This is a sealed session!'

Plenipotentiary Niobe Velox walks past the empty benches and straight onto the dais. The Kinetic justice at the Fyres's right stands at once and Niobe descends into the seat with the serenity of a queen drifting onto a pillowcase. Her black, unrobed suit stands out on the bench, as does the thin, oscillating diamond necklace.

There's another entrant at the door. Bald but grey-bearded, thin but suave, arrogant but occasionally empathic, the Master of the Sensorial Synod, my master, stands like a sentry. His eyes have found me. I thank the Magon for the scrubbers. Diego Sabrador's cogniscience is said to be fierce.

The Chief Justice is fuming – literally: her hair bun looks like a crumbling chunk of coal. Even her eyebrows are flashing. 'Drift down, Natalie. You're voying to combust yourself,' says Niobe as Fyres settles back into the chair.

'I needn't rewit Your Magnificence that this is a *judicial* proceeding,' Fyres replies. 'Only sworn justices may sit at the bench.'

'I cog this seat belongs to my synod, not to a justice, able as he is. I can assign whomever I wish to sit here. Today, I assign myself.'

The Electrient justice, seated a few seats to the left, interrupts, 'Even when your son is the subject of the order under consideration?'

'This be much irregular!' cries the green-haired Botanial.

'The doors are closed, Erika,' Niobe replies, not bothering to look at her. 'You can drop that grating Lowtongue you glimmer to dict up.'

Erika is on her feet. Black petals start sprouting from her palms. 'For the love of the Magon, sit down,' Fyres barks. Erika does so with a pout. The Zoonic and Cyronic on either side of her have to shake the floral effusion from their desks. I notice Sabrador has made his way to the dais himself now. The Sensorial justice lets him sit too.

'Your Worships,' the Grand Attorney purrs, considering his fingernails, 'the Grand Mastery protests these theatrics in the strongest possible terms. Uh, the legal theatrics,' he adds with a bow to Erika, 'not Your Worship's very understandable anger.'

'So noted,' Fyres replies, glaring at Niobe and Erika in turn. 'Perhaps the Tribunal should vote on whether to seat these new … appointees?'

Sabrador speaks for the first time, in a steady, baritone Midtongue accent that absorbs the attention of the room. 'I think Your Worship will find that the Charter is clear: each synod is assigned one seat on the High Tribunal and it is the prerogative of the respective master to determine who represents that synod, within the constitutional arrangements of that synod. There is no suggestion that masters cannot assign themselves.'

'We could always re-adjudicate that fascinating mini case involving – was it your husband, Natalie?' says Niobe. 'If I'm not miscogged, you sat on that case, didn't you? I cogged that was a superious conflict of interest, sor. You have a flair for grift.'

Fyres looks like she wants to incinerate Niobe. The other justices don't seem surprised or alarmed by this information.

The Kinetic Attorney speaks for the first time. 'The Kinetic Synod petitions Your Worships for a writ of extradition of Taye Rapp Velox to Kinetic synodic jurisdiction.'

Taye catches my glance. He looks defeated. It's so different from his usual slick bravado. His gaze falls to the floor.

'Yes, we read the application, Katelyn,' says Fyres.

The Grand Attorney cuts in, 'Your Worships, the Grand Mastery *rejects* the petition on the grounds that the arrest was ordered under Grand Magisterial aegis. Ergo, he must be tried in an inter-synodic court.'

'Such as this one?' says Niobe.

The GA lifts his nose up slightly, but butters his voice with obsequiousness. 'It would be inappropriate for the Kinetic Synod to adjudicate in-house the arrest of Your Magnificence's son. We would have no guarantee of impartiality. Your Worships can uncercog that tomorrow's Subcouncil election makes this matter very sensitive. The last thing the Tribunal needs is to be accused of meddling the day before the Society votes.'

'If anybit,' says Fyres, 'the Tribunal would be veritous to assume justice would be antidicted. This is gleamly an attempt to exonerate Plenipotentiary Velox's son via a backdoor.'

'But, Bossa Jussice,' interjects the Zoonic justice, who is so far to the side that everyone has to swivel to see him, 'this arress been order from a Pyrrhic judge. This be not Pyrrhic overreach, chime?'

'Thank you, Prit,' groans Fyres. 'So eloquently posed in your beautiful and insistent Lowtongue, yet so devoid of evidence.'

'Are you referring to evidence I haven't seen yet, Justice Ru?' Sabrador asks.

'Yes, we must viz the docket,' Niobe says.

'Ah, that's why ye are here! Ye want to viz what the Grand Mastery has on Mr Velox,' says Fyres. Her hair is glowing blue. 'Again,' she says, 'ye two – Your Magnificences, Worships, whatever we're dicting you today – ye are not privy to the information in the docket as ye are not sworn justices. Justice Ru may viz it. Ye cannot.'

'We do have security clearances. Maxxer than yours, veritly, Natalie. But perhaps His Worship could awit us as to the facts?'

Everyone is staring at Ru, who looks shocked for a moment by the attention.

'No, he will not,' Fyre says. 'Do not dict anybit, Prit.'

Ru leans his head enough to see Niobe and Sabrador from his side of the podium. ‘Bossas, the order for the arress been come from a Pyrrhic judge, not from the SIB,’ he says. ‘The Bureau been take the order from the syn and been give it onny to Pyrrhic grinders.’

‘So, this was an operation gleamly conducted under the SIB, but it was functionally a Pyrrhic affair. Bono, that glimmers max corruption on the part of the Pyrrhic Synod,’ Niobe declares. ‘I would assume Her Supremacy the Grand Master herself must have been merged up in this. It’s a veritly political prosecution, on the eve of an election. Perhaps it was a feeble attempt to intimidate the leader of a caucus that may well be about to win a majority on the Subcouncil!’

‘These accusations will need to be tested in a trial,’ replies Fyres.

‘Prit, were you basing your comments on hearsay or do you perhaps have the names of all the people merging around in this Pyrrhic-only operation within the Bureau?’

‘It all be in this docket,’ Ru says.

‘Are we to believe,’ intervenes the Electrient justice, ‘that just because the Pyrrhic Master happens to be the incumbent Grand Master, and just because Pyrrhics happen to have gained employment in the positions relevant to this case, that the entire operation was some Pyrrhic conspiracy? Plenipotentiary Velox, have you not been preaching for years about overcoming this very kind of prejudiced thinking?’

‘Your Worship would make an eloquent Progressive,’ responds Niobe.

‘But you are using this court for your own partisan synodic purposes, are you not? You cannot possibly expect us to let you walk in here, strong-arm your way into a seat on this bench and sit in judgement on a case involving your own son?’

The Mediciant justice, fragile and very aged, raises his hand. It takes a few more rounds between Niobe and the Electrient before anyone notices he wants to speak, so he shouts feebly, ‘Why all the interest in this specific artefact? I understand it’s a … watch of some kind?’ Taye’s jaw tightens. ‘Why is everyone so apoplectic about some Impotent’s watch? There are far more dangerous artefacts on the black market. I wouldn’t be surprised if some of you have jewellery stolen from Impotents on you right now. The sensoricaptured data in them might yield a treasure of information. And recrimination!’

Niobe and Fyres have both become steel. The justices who have not participated yet now are piqued. I don’t dare look at Sabrador.

The Mediciant nods. ‘So, there we have it. This is a fight over which synod gets possession of some critical intelligence source – the Kinetics, or the Pyrrhics via the Grand Mastery. In the

middle of it, we have a young man who stands accused of the illegal importation of an Impotent artefact. Is the point of all this drama the young man or the artefact?'

Niobe has been staring at her attorney, who takes a while to realise she's been cued. She stumbles, 'Your Worships, our synod is not interested in possession of the Impotent artefact. We concede it has been confiscated by the Intelligence Bureau, as it should be. Our suit is for the transfer of Mr Velox to our custody. There are genuine fears of a politically motivated prosecution here.'

'But there is a case to be answered, correct?'

'If there is, it can be answered in a lower court. In the meantime, Mr Velox should be free. The fairness of tomorrow's election is at risk.'

If Fyres could roll her eyes any higher, she'd lose them in her head. Niobe taps on her desk. 'Diego and I have campaigns to run,' she says. 'Can we make this quick? I move—'

'This isn't the Subcouncil, Niobe. We don't make motions from the bench!'

'Then call for a vote or whatever it is ye do.'

'You might be surprised to viz that we first allow each side to set out their case. Only then do we vote.'

'Then let's hear a précis, by all means,' says the Barotic justice. He's pumping air between his hands, making dust motes swirl in the light. I can't help but notice the others eye him as if he's in on this, unable not to help his Barotic-born colleague.

The Kinetic Attorney says, 'Your Worships, the detail revealed by Justice Ru himself is grounds for the Tribunal's suspicion. There is enough evidence of a politically motivated prosecution in the docket to warrant Mr Velox's release from SIB custody. If the Grand Mastery wishes to pursue prosecution with more acceptable evidence, they are welcome to lay a charge in the regular manner and have the case tried in open court.'

The Mediciant interjects, 'But that Impotent artefact was recovered from Mr Velox's possession, correct? Neither of the parties contests this.'

'No, Your Worship, but it is the biased—'

'The artefact was Impotent. Mr Velox was in illegal possession. The Pyrrhicity of the agents who arrested him or even of those involved at the SIB in locating the artefact in the first place has no bearing on the crime itself.'

'Your Wor—'

'I understand political manoeuvres are happening, but even you acknowledge the criminality here. The arrest should be upheld and Mr Velox sent to trial.'

‘Your Worship, I—’

‘He’s covered by Sensorial confession!’

The look on the Kinetic Attorney’s face could melt lead. The justices are craning their heads to work out who spoke – except Sabrador, whose face produces a faint smile for the first time.

It takes a few seconds before I realise the insanity of what I’ve done, that I just interrupted the High Tribunal.

‘What was that, counsel?’ asks the Barotic justice.

My legs bring me to standing. The Kinetic Attorney hisses, ‘Sit down and be quiet as you were dicted!’

I look to Sabrador. He doesn’t look encouraging exactly, but his head tilts slightly to the side in curiosity. ‘Counsel?’ repeats the Barotic justice. ‘Who are you?’

‘I’m—’ I begin, but my voice comes out as a gurgle. I cough and try again. ‘My name is Advocate Miguel Vidente. I am the defendant’s attorney.’

‘It would appear this is your maiden appearance before us?’

‘It is, Your Worship.’

‘And you are not Kinetic?’

Niobe’s necklace has slowed to an almost growling oscillation. She’s stroking her chin with one finger.

‘You were saying something about Sensorial confession?’ the Justice asks.

‘Uh, yes, Your Worship. The artefact’s existence was revealed in the process of a sensed confession to a Sensorial guía. As such, the information revealed is protected under Sensorial confession rights.’

Justice Ru is swiping through his crystalpod. ‘Where be this evidence? It not be here.’

Fyres’s voice is thrumming with ice. ‘There was no guía on the scene. Nor does the docket mention one.’

‘The guía in question is me,’ I say.

Fyres laughs. ‘Niobe, I never cogged you were serious about breaking boundaries, but now your son is hiring Sensorial guías as attorneys? By the Magon, this is exterious!’

‘If I may continue, Your Worship?’ I ask. Fyres looks around her as if someone will reveal the whole case is a joke. ‘In additional, the Tribunal should know that there is credible evidence that the SIB’s information was obtained through illegal cognigraphy.’

The room is dead silent. I swear the temperature is rising. ‘I beg your pardon, young man? Illegal cognigraphy? You aren’t simply huffing up exterious theories on the fly now, are you?’

‘We could prove it in trial. We have evidence of targeted cognigraphy by a Societal institution.’ Leonor will love this.

The Mediciant makes a swatting motion with his hands. ‘Hold on, hold on! This doesn’t account for the illegal possession of the artefact.’

‘It does, Your Worship, on two grounds.’ Taye is sitting up for the first time. Niobe looks like she’s enjoying herself profoundly. ‘First, if the intelligence that gave the SIB suspicion in the first place that there might be an Impotent artefact in Mr Velox’s possession was obtained through illegal, targeted cognigraphy, against his rights to mental privacy, the intelligence would not be admissible in trial. Second, if the detail in question were revealed to a Sensorial in the course of a sensed confession to a guía for Sensorial counselling, the confession itself is protected and would not be justiciable.’

‘I cog the only question for the Tribunal now is whether this needs to go to trial at all,’ hums Niobe. ‘Natalie, would your synod be happy if this was even dicted as a possibility in public trial?’ Fyres just stares. ‘Either way, Taye cannot remain under arrest.’

Chapter 12

Taye grips my shoulders, squeezing and shaking so hard I almost stumble into Dovetry. ‘Thank you,’ Taye says. His gait is easy again. ‘That was so superious, fra. Fyres’s hair was going to explode up!’ He walks alongside me for a few moments, then grabs me again.

We’re still in the scrubbered corridors of the Needle. Niobe and Springform are walking ahead of us, firing frenetic crystalcalls about polls and voter outreach. Concern over her son’s arrest has vanished with the dismissal. Dovetry seems to be some sort of bodyguard, from what I can tell. Her eyes dart between the staffers who move out of our way. We’re heading towards the deepest section of the Needle where the Subcouncil chamber is located. Judicial robes are giving way to the lapel pins of Subcouncil caucuses.

I want to ask Taye what happened. I’ve heard enough to know he was arrested and that the watch was found, but when was that? Could it have been just after he drove me home that night, when Leonor and Isabel were so worried? I also want to ping Leonor to make sure she hasn’t been targeted at work. Once again, Taye Velox has pulled me into a morass. That demeanour of his is so buoyant and assured.

As we move further into the legislative quarters, the scrubbers dissipate and I have to clench my fists against the rising feelingstreams. There’s something feverish in the sentido común here. After all, it’s a concentration of politicos salivating over imminent election results. My connection to Taye’s feelings gets stronger as we walk. He’s numb. Shaken. Lonely.

We’re taken past the Subcouncil chamber’s hallowed doorway and into a wing of offices. The doors closest to us declare the names and constituencies of ruling Preservist subcouncillors in glowing gold. I catch some of the independents too, especially the ones in Glouw’s coalition. We even pass the door for the Barrio Tercero’s representative, a slimy Cogniscient called Santiago Sapiente. Through the doorway, we see him yelling Spanish-inflected curses into a crystalpod. Isabel would find it a poetic sight.

Niobe’s office is deeper in the complex with the opposition offices. It has a forecourt that is packed with aides, some of whom are crammed at corner desks that were never meant to fit in here. It’s a babble of crystalcalls, ogling at floating screens with stats and charts, and harried conversations. ‘I didn’t realise the campaign was run from in here,’ I say.

‘This is just the executive bit,’ says Taye. His ánimo is shrinking.

Niobe leans towards Taye and says in a low voice, ‘Maybe some work will fack your mind off everybit.’ Springform flicks a screen to her crystalpod. ‘Chime the office in Barotic Borough 4. I’m not happy with the turnout operation over there. Preservists had a thousand at their rally last night. Awit they haven’t missed somebit. We can’t lose that seat, mon fils. Your grandparents grew up there.’

‘Oui, Maman,’ he says, giving his mother an easy smile.

‘Miguel, juxt me in my office.’

The bookshelves that line one side of the cuboidal room are ancient and creaking, so the furniture, clearly an attempt to import a sense of opulence, floats literally and awkwardly against the stone walls and worryingly drooping ceiling. I can only assume the accommodation is better when a caucus is no longer in opposition.

Seated in an armchair by a hovering fire is Plenipotentiary Diego Sabrador. I hadn’t sensed him – he’s scrubbered, just like Niobe. When he sees me, he rises slowly and I almost forget to bow. ‘That was some efficient lawyering, Señor Vidente. May I?’ He holds out both hands. His face remains ice.

I’ve felt cornered and used since Springform arrived at the brewery. The presence of my master, a man who has opposed the Progressives with vitriol and clamour for years, in the office of the Progressive leader is jarring. And now he wants to read my pensario? I can’t untangle all the strands of politicking that are pulling me about.

‘Can I say no, Vuestra Magnicencia?’ I ask aloud, knowing he could easily have read my reluctance already. He merely reaches his hands further and lifts his eyebrows. Niobe is smoking some kind of pink sage and fussing with a few screens refracting off her desk’s crystalslab. Sabrador cocks his head slightly. I try to remember what strands of cogniscience he reads best. My mother once told me, I’m sure.

Reckoning that I’m just a prop at this point, I reach out and clasp his hands. He responds only loosely and his gaze drifts. It is a posture so delicate, so unthreatening, but it obscures that he is dredging through the depths of my consciousness, lifting neural stones I might not know I have, interpreting the movements and quirks of my pensario through his terrifying mind.

It may only be a few seconds later that he releases me. He turns around towards Niobe, who looks up from the crystalslab. The two share a heavy look. Sabrador says, ‘Somewhere between consumidad and ansia at the moment, heading towards almanistad.’

‘Almanistad?’ I say before I catch my gumption. Sabrador has the grace to look surprised.

Niobe rubs her temple. ‘Almanos are Sensorial soulmates, verit?’ she asks Sabrador, who waves a flat hand to suggest the translation is only half right. ‘And Taye is witless?’ She gestures loosely to the corner.

I remain confused until Sabrador says, ‘Take a seat, Miguel.’ When I do, he chooses the chair to my left and sits with his folded hands clasped over his stomach. I’m holding my body tensely, sitting right on the edge of the settee. The busy anxiousness of Niobe’s office staff on the other side of the door is edging into me, even if the plenipotentiaries in this room are beyond my magiary’s reach. I’m certain no magiary is needed to detect the confusion and fear in my face.

Niobe takes her time before spindling into the sofa opposite. She perches an elbow on her crossed leg and leans forward like a cat inspecting a mouse for its worth to her satiety. Her necklace ripples slowly, menacingly. At this proximity, I can see the lines starting to creep from her eyes and lips, the hints of exhaustion behind the famous frame. She traces a fingernail in light circles across her chin. I want to flee.

Niobe suddenly leans backwards. The smoke from the cigarette starts to make spiral patterns around her, tendrils swirling into caresses of her neck and cheeks. ‘I ken your mother maxxer than I suggested the other night,’ she says slowly. ‘Much maxxer. Back in the days when Midburb activists bonded around on university campuses with Upperburb miscreants, when Progressivism was being forged across synodic lines. We were a superious min group of disaffected Potents, protesting and chanting about every issue we could cog about. I was one of the first formal Progressives, you wit. She taught me all about conexiones. They were fascinating to us. She always dicted we were … what was it? Ideoleras, that’s verit. She dicted we were ideoleras for business and empatidas for fun. I haven’t vizzed her in years. Our paths diverged after I … bono, after I rose in this synod and she turned to academia and deserted the activism of her youth. Dict me, does she still prefer lascivanos? Never drifted down with someone?’

The revelation that my mother and this woman were empatidas is stunning. ‘She still prefers lascivanos in the men she bonds, yes, Your Magnificence.’

‘My son,’ she purrs, flicking some ash into the air, which too starts to swirl in the kinetickry, ‘doesn’t trust anyone.’ Trust. That’s a Midtongue word. The register and the vowels of her native Midtongue dialect ease into her mouth. How many people get to hear this? ‘He never has trusted people. He comes across as gregarious, I know. But he keeps everyone at arm’s length. Even me. That’s how Taye has always been.’ She pronounces his name in two syllables, enunciating the ‘e’.

She stares more deeply. I wonder if she could hurt people with the smoke alone. Collect it kinetically into an ashy spear. ‘That is,’ she adds, sharpening, ‘until you.’ She lets the implication dangle with the fog. Sabrador’s head is tipped upwards, as if he’s engrossed in the ceiling. I can’t tell if Niobe wants me to respond, so I just sit frigidly. It’s all I can do not to collapse before her. She glances at Sabrador. ‘You understand how surprised I was to see the son of Patricia Vidente appearing with him at Club Pique of all places. And then how surprised I was to see him trusting you.’ Her tone shimmers suspicion and relief simultaneously. ‘Are you attracted to Taye?’

My nerves snap.

‘Do we have to go there, Niobe?’ Sabrador interrupts in a breathy whine.

She raises her hands. ‘In the context of my synod, it’s a question I have to ask.’ He tilts his head to her with a droll look. Keeping her eyes firmly on Sabrador, she asks, ‘Am I even using the right language? Hmmm? What is the term the Western Impotents use? Orientation, right? That’s it. Sexual orientation. What a concept. Like a dial that’s been turned and suddenly we’re supposed to permit you to fuck whomever you want because it’s your design, some innate, uncontrollable urge we should respect. They’re so creative, Impotents.’

My heart is pummelling against my ribcage. This kind of venom is familiar but that she, a figure so imbued with magial and political power, has said it makes it far more intimidating. Few people can oppress like she can. And she’s supposed to be the Progressive champion.

‘Niobe, I told you,’ says Sabrador, his expression turning at last towards firmness. ‘Ansia is hardly ever sexual. Consumidad can be, but for most of us it’s mostly an intense seizure of emotional bonding. Almanistad is often sexual, usually formalised in a marriage or partnership, but needn’t be. Attraction has so many components for us. Sex is merely a relational dimension.’

‘I wit, Diego.’ I can’t tell if the Hightongue emerging back into her speech is a slip or a scalpel. She presses a finger against the bridge of her nose. ‘Cred me, I do. But your culture is your max world. It’s foreign to Kinetics, to all of us. Taye is oblivious to it.’

‘And in your vision for a post-synodic Society, whose cultural prejudices will have social weight?’

This argument may be performative or a tired, instinctive routine. Niobe’s lips twitch into a smile. ‘Verit, Diego, verit. However, I need to wit where Taye’s sudden, high superious cred of this man obbs from. And what might be tenoring it.’

‘It wouldn’t be first time an Upperburber has found a Sensorial to be an attentive and empathic and available ear,’ he says. ‘It happens often enough to be a cliché. There’s an

expectation among my people that other Potents see us merely as vessels for easy companionship and uncomplicated connection. Objects for the gratification of those who enjoy the freedom of being agents in this Society.'

'So, you're dicting Taye had nil other vir he felt he could confide in, nil other sor even, so the first Sensorial he clashed up with became his consumigo? And now he's voying towards almanistad?' Her face softens for a split second; it is a glint of something deep and emotive that she covers quickly. For that tiny moment, I see how like her son she is.

My magiary is grasping to understand the motives behind all these angles, but the magial silence leaves me unmoored. I want to show Sabrador that I'm grateful for his defence, but he seems to have found again his fascination with the ceiling.

Niobe slackens her vowels again. 'What exactly did you see – or feel or read or whatever the word is – when he showed you the sensoricaptured watch?'

I have to cough the choke out of my throat before I can respond, 'It's hard to describe it, Your Magnificence.' I just told the High Tribunal of the Society that the watch contains protected information, yet these masters are here, demanding it. Is that why Sabrador is in Niobe's office?

'I do know how cognigraphy works, young man. You're Sentient, correct? So, you would have felt the sensoricapture. What did you feel? Describe it. In detail.'

I look to Sabrador for help with this absurd request, but he is as unavailable as a stone wall. I have no option but to answer – he will know if I'm lying or withholding. Hech, he probably read the details earlier. Am I just performing for Niobe's benefit now?

Niobe speaks again. 'Miguel, in becoming Taye's attorney, you indirectly fell under my employ, whether he pays or not, so you are a Kinetic functionary. Plenipotentiary Sabrador and I both have the highest security clearances. Whatever you want to consider privileged information can be shared with us.'

The reasoning is shaky legally, but she's just pretending to be giving me options.

'Well, it was a lot,' I say. 'My – my body couldn't really interpret the feelingstream. It was just so intense and strange, unlike anything I'd ever experienced. Which meant I had no baseline, no way to catch onto what was flowing into me. All I sensed was snippets. Flashes of ánimo. I think one ánimo. And I did also see too, which is unusual for me. I don't know if that was just my brain trying to find vision for the emotionalia.'

'Stop hedging,' Niobe snaps. 'Just describe.' Sabrador is still motionless. Niobe's irritation is causing the residual smoke to vibrate. It's almost Barotic.

‘Someone – I think the person who was wearing the watch – was bleeding. That much was clear. He – it was a male energy, I think – he was hurt badly. There were screams, lots of them. It was dark too – I don’t know. Someone was calling for a father. And there was heat. Fire. Lots of it. He was … he was going to die. He knew it. He was afraid. It was … so, so much. His ánimo was foreign somehow. And there were Pyrrhics there too.’

Niobe bolts up so fast I flinch.

‘Pyrrhics were there?’ Sabrador asks.

‘You’re absolutely sure?’ asks Niobe. Her necklace has frozen in a diagonal loop.

‘I’m pretty sure,’ I say.

Sabrador leans towards me. ‘Miguel, this very important,’ he says. ‘We need you to be more than pretty sure. Could you have ascribed Pyrrhicity to the emotionalia? Could you be making a connection, an interpretation that wasn’t in the raw feelingstream itself? Could your mind be placing Pyrrhics there as a placeholder or symbol to explain something inexplicable?’

‘Vuestra Magnificencia, you can read me,’ I tell him.

He speaks to Niobe in response. ‘I read glimpses of it, but he’s right that he couldn’t process the emotionalia correctly. Even a trained sensorigrapher would struggle to make sense of it. What makes you think Pyrrhics were there?’

This is starting to feel like Sensorial initiation school. ‘There was a thought that kept coming to me. Words. When I’m overwhelmed, my mind defaults to language and sonic codes to help me make sense of the feelingstream.’ I don’t know how to explain this to a Kinetic, so I’m using Sensorial language in the hope Sabrador can translate it. ‘So maybe the words I heard weren’t exact or what this man was thinking verbatim, but it was very clear. Fire on his head. Fire on his head. That’s what he kept thinking. That sounds like at least one Pyrrhic was there.’

Sabrador stares for a while, certainly sifting through my pensario to verify what I’ve said. Eventually, he gives Niobe a nod.

Her eyes are alive as she presses the side of her clasped palms into her chin. She seems to have decided something significant, because when she speaks again, it is with new amiableness. ‘The artefact Taye showed you was seized by the SIB, which means it is now in Grand Mastery possession, which in turn means it is controlled by the Pyrrhics. My influence only extends so far. I cannot retrieve it. If my caucus wins a majority tomorrow, perhaps I could exert some influence through the Subcouncil. The sensoricaptured data in that object is of critical, Societal importance, Miguel. I cannot explain why.’

‘The case was dismissed, so you won’t get the intelligence through the court system.’

‘Naturally. Superpotentiary Glouw might try to revive the case, so I would like to keep you under contract to assist.’

‘I’m just a public defender, Your Magnificence. This kind of law isn’t familiar to me.’

‘And yet you derailed the strategy of the Kinetic Attorney herself.’ I can’t tell if she’s impressed or disgusted.

‘I only did that because I knew what happened that night.’

‘There is a second thing I need you to do,’ she says, brushing my objection away with the fading smoke. ‘You will be compensated for it, of course, above what Taye gave you a few weeks ago. Ordinarily, I’d have Taye sent to a guía I trusted.’

‘I’m not a trained guía.’

‘You know his ánimo already. Some of it is in you,’ says Sabrador.

Niobe rolls her eyes slightly. ‘This doesn’t have to complicated, Miguel. Think of it as the most connected client you’ve ever had and the condition of my protection. I understand Taye’s fiancée has got herself a bit too excited.’ She so often commands silences after she speaks. I find myself looking to Sabrador for help, but he ignores my thoughts.

Niobe Velox preaches equality for all Potents, but she manipulates those beneath her with such ease. She nods to the quiet. ‘You are to go to Taye and cognigraph from him exactly what he knows about this incident in Impotent Johannesburg and how much he knows. The involvement of any Pyrrhics would be critical information.’

Sabrador adds, ‘Technically it would be a sensorigraph, not a cognigraph.’

She blinks the correction away. ‘The important thing is the intelligence.’ Her fixation doesn’t make sense. Why is everyone so keen to know what Taye knows? Can’t they just ask him? The elite classes are shifting resources and bending laws for this. And why is Sabrador here? I still can’t work that out.

Sabrador is staring at me. Fuck. He’s reading all this. Why don’t you just share what’s going on here? His eyes narrow, then watch Niobe. ‘Perhaps some context would help,’ he says. Niobe gives Sabrador a murderous look. He shrugs. ‘He will find out a lot when he sensorigraphs your son, Niobe. His sensing will be more accurate if he knows the context.’

‘Magnificencia, I don’t understand why you can’t cognigraph him,’ I say. ‘Surely, you’re far more skilled than I am. I can’t control my magiary at the best of times.’

‘We aren’t monsters,’ Niobe breathes. ‘As I said, Taye trusts you, for reasons that really aren’t clear to me yet, but he does. I would prefer that this information is given to you in a setting that is safe for him. The last thing I want is the SIB doing it to him.’

Sabrador is watching Niobe cautiously. ‘So, context,’ he says. Niobe makes to speak, but he continues, ‘You were stationed around the same time as Taye for your Societal Service duties in Johannesburg, correct? You will know that there are raw magium deposits at the same depth as the base. Most was mined a century ago, but deep down there is some left and fortunately the Impotents’ mining operations still haven’t gone as far down as the base or our mines. I’m sure you also were aware that the SIB was monitoring magium smuggling networks in the area.’ It was only a rumour, in fact. Bumona mentioned it often. ‘Clearly, some Potents, potentially working with the tacit approval of subcouncillors and other synodic leaders, are making quick money by saturating Impotent black markets with magially spiked contraband. Now, Taye Velox was involved in some incident over there related to these networks.’

Niobe rises abruptly. She walks towards the bookshelves and faces the stuffy volumes with her arms folded. ‘And all of this,’ she says darkly, ‘is more highly classified than anything you have ever known or even approached, Señor Vidente.’

‘Naturally,’ Sabrador says.

I ask Sabrador again, ‘Why do you want me to sensorigraph Taye? I’m not good at it, as you can see in my mind.’

Niobe turns again to Sabrador, ‘Does he care for Taye? Or is it a selfish attraction?’

Sabrador replies, ‘It’s new to both of them. But he does care.’

She walks over to her desk and says, looking at her crystalslab screens, ‘Taye is outside. I’ll have Daniel prepare a flycar for you to the Kinetic Mastery.’ She wants this to be done *now*? ‘And rewit he’s engaged. I’ve had exterious clash ups with Sensorials fore. Ye often want what we can’t give you.’

Chapter 13

Daniel, sullen and indifferent, gestures me back to the office. My nerves haven't settled from Niobe's interrogation as it is. This room only amplifies it.

'I'm supposed to be at work,' I tell Daniel feebly.

He replies without looking up from his desk, 'It's been tenored.'

'Do I still have a job?'

'Plenipotentiary Sabrador made arrangements,' he says irritably. 'Her Magnificence gave you a new order, verit? Do it, then.'

A trickle of prickly angst leads to Taye's ánimo. He's at a desk in the corner and talking into a crystalpod with the energy of a man who wasn't arrested and didn't just trigger an inter-synodic incident.

I also sense a piquant ánimo shimmering into the room's sentido. It's reflective, like a feedback loop of my own numb tension streaming back into me. The ánimo's source has been lurking on the other side of the office's entrance. I almost chide myself at feeling comfortable in the resonance of another Sentient Sensorial. He gestures towards me. With Daniel apparently well distracted and the room busy enough to allow me to blend in, I follow.

The marble floors clatter with the rushed footsteps and eager spirits of politicians around us. The Sentient wears his beard in the same style as Sabrador – clipped at severe angles. He peers inside towards Daniel. 'Does everyone around here have to behave like they're in a political thriller?' I ask. I wince at his responding irritation. The two sensations, mine and his, ripple into harmonic vibration.

He holds out his crystalpod. 'Plenipotenciario Sabrador recommended a guía de sentientes for you,' he says.

'I have guías already.'

'Whom you last saw a year ago.'

'Yes, but I'd rather see them than a stranger.'

He raises his eyebrows. I tap my crystalpod to his. The name on my screen is unfamiliar. He leans so his lips are right by my ear and whispers, 'Su Magnificencia also wanted me to tell you to be extremely careful around the Veloxes. They have agendas that don't coincide with ours.'

He looks at me as if we both know something we aren't articulating, but I'm thoroughly confused. This world of leaders and aides has always seemed unreachable to me. Now I see it's a menagerie of tactics and hushed conversations and deployments of force on helpless others.

'She's a good guía,' he says. 'And please ask the question that's making you so agitated.'

'I just wanted to know why Sabrador is allying with Velox,' I say. 'He's been campaigning with Sensorial Independents for weeks, for his whole career to be honest. Wasn't his electoral platform about our synod's autonomy against the coercive synods above us? And I thought he's a clear supporter for Glouw on the Council. He said she allows for our autonomy. Now he's plotting with Velox in her office.'

'Vale, Vidente, you're playing high politics now. Enjoy it.'

'Not by choice!'

He gives a limp smile and walks off.

I've been sensing Taye watching. His feelingstream is amusedly curious. When I reach his desk, he smiles broadly. 'I'm not slant,' he says, the word now sounding fiercer to me in a Velox's mouth after hearing Niobe's viewpoint, 'but to me, Buscador is a max bonoform vir, fra. Would you even dict he's … you wit … calorous?'

'You know him?'

'He's one of Sabrador's aides. Bit of a fixer, if you wit what I mean. He managed to obb a Kinetic vir quasi a year ago. Tenored a max exterious scandal. He's courted up plenty of men. Never heard what kind of conexiones those were.' His emotions and tone incline towards something I have no energy to pursue. When I don't respond, his ánimo sinks. 'What did Maman want with you?' He keeps typing on the crystalslab's glossy surface.

'To sensorigraph you.'

His brows furrow. 'Sensorigraph?'

'Sense you. Find out what happened. Extract information. Telepathically interrogate.'

'Didn't we already try that?' I feel my fists clench in response to the emotionalia swirling in, which he's probably kept at bay all morning. 'How much …' He lowers his voice, though the office is too unsettled to care. 'How much do you cog she wits?'

'About Johannesburg? As much as me, I think. She seems to believe you have some critical intelligence about Pyrrhics.'

He fiddles with his cufflinks. 'Bono. I miscog then if she wits anybit much.' His voice fades away with his facade.

‘Listen, I don’t know what’s going on. What’s happening feels like it happened to someone else. Seriously. I’ve been shepherded around courts and given cryptic instructions by another synod’s master and pulled into secret conversations by doorways and I don’t even know if I’m technically still a public defender, because I’m apparently a barred attorney for your synod.’

Taye’s empathy hovers for a bit, trying to find expression. ‘My mother is max intense,’ he says. ‘Were her instructions to you an order or a suggestion?’

‘You know the answer to that.’

His tongue circles his lips. ‘It would be easier if she just dicted me what she wants, you wit? She hasn’t asked me once about what happened in Johannesburg. Not once.’ He doesn’t notice the crystalslab starting to bend under his unconscious kinetickry. ‘When you fack this sensorigraph, will I be awit of everybit you’re sensing, in the moment? Or will it be like the other night when you just passed out?’

‘You could just tell me what happened.’

His ánimo curls in on itself. ‘It’s – no, no I can’t just dict you.’

‘When did they arrest you?’

He clicks his neck, stiffening his posture but remembering I can sense through it. ‘This morning. Just as I obbed in here.’ He looks at the door. ‘They wanted to surprise Maman. At least the press didn’t viz anybit.’

Does this happen often among these people? ‘For what it’s worth, Taye, I am sorry for all of this.’

His mouth twitches. His ánimo is tilting towards the gravity of feelings that chafe at my confidence. He’s absorbed in the reverie, letting his eyes darken and flame.

‘Taye. You’re pulverising the crystalslab,’ I say. He snorts when he sees the corner of his desk’s crystalslab smouldering in a loop of kinetickry, sending the refracted light into distortions. ‘My sister’s a trained cognigrapher. Cognigraphs are more accurate.’

‘If my mother willed your sister to fack it, she would have tenored it. Rather you do it.’

I find myself settling into the quiver of connection that his ánimo offers for a moment. He has come to trust me quickly and heavily. I might bristle at the stickiness of it, but I can’t deny I feel some duty of care towards him, despite myself and despite Mamá’s warnings.

When he sees me smiling, he asks, ‘What?’

‘It’s just – it’s nothing.’

He wants to pursue, but something catches him. He yawns, ‘Now we can glimmer like leaving work mid-morning is normal.’ He makes no effort to move in the direction of his

suggestion. He makes as if to speak, pauses, looks at me curiously and asks, finally, ‘If someone around you is lazy or wants to procrastinate or somebit, does that make you feel the same?’

‘Not if I already felt the same myself. Then it’s just an amplification.’

He nods like he’s contemplating something profound. ‘How do you wit the difference between what you want to do and what others want?’

‘I’m coming to realise that you’re similar to me in many ways.’

He sighs at the sight of the crystalslab that has by now disintegrated into ash and glass shards. I wonder if his magiary ever surprises him. ‘Then which one of us is more trapped by the actions and interior lives of others?’ he asks.

Chapter 14

The rhythms of my old life – leaving home early, flybussing into work with the same commuters, shuffling through the same courts, flying back home with the more of the same people, enduring the Barrio's quirks and social rituals, clustering a few conexiones to me, living a life that felt ordered, boring yet stable – these rhythms have been disrupted. Even the air is different. The island is trudging through waters far further south now. There's an ice to the air that forebodes. I'm functionally imprisoned in yet another a glamorous flycar.

I find myself calling out to the sentido común, trying to find some sense of familiarity or locatedness in the City's psychic pulse, but even that feels foreign today. Taye keeps rubbing his fingers over his wrists, his feelings spiralling through the sensations of arrest, handcuffing, being caught. There's heavier guilt beneath that, though, such that the arrest seemed minor.

The Kinetic Mastery's halls are more cavernous than I expected. Niobe must like sparse white space, because every room feels similar – large, windowed, a few angular pieces of floating utilitarian furniture and many echoes. It's clinical. The only thing that seems out of place is a small statue held aloft above a table in the living room. It's a bronze woman, styled in slender motions, with her arms reaching towards the floating swaddle of a baby. 'That would be a cargazo,' says Taye next to me. 'It's been around long enough.'

The object pulses an old, poignant cry that tickles the hand I move over it. There's something else there too. It's so faint I can hardly detect it and it almost retreats from me. The closest I can come to describing it is ansia, but the communal kind.

'Gleamly the Impotents made bronzes like this,' Taye adds. His ánimo hesitates around the cargazo. He rubs his wrist again. 'There have always been Kinetics. In every bloodline of the human race. They just obb up so rarely. When she found this, she decided which Impotent culture would name me. I cog in those days she cogged she'd hold onto somebit that could define her in opposition to Kinetic culture. I don't wit if that's veritous still. She wist how to behave like a Kinetic and her magiary was too max to ignore, so she became too powerful to ignore.' Does he realise part of that behaviour required bearing him, maintaining a bloodline that could reproduce the rarest magiary consistently?

I sense a familiar piquant and rumbling ánimo – a warm but fierce vein. And two others I recognise. Then there are two laughs, a roaring alto and a cackling bass. Something in Taye

churns and pitches. ‘Taye?’ calls the low voice. It has a tired, sneering timbre to it. I note the two-syllable pronunciation again, which Taye himself has yet to use around me.

‘Oui, Papa?’ Taye grumbles, rubbing his eyes.

‘Venez ici!’

‘Viz him not care that I was arrested,’ Taye mumbles.

We find the laughers in the kitchen. Mamá and a stocky man are reclining against the marble island and holding large glasses of alcohol. Behind them are Leonor and Isabel. Leonor is thoroughly uncomfortable. Isabel’s ego is alive.

Taye is oddly sheepish and mutters a pathetic, ‘Hi, Professor. Sorores.’

‘Taye Velox, you’ve obbed bonoform,’ Mamá says in a smoothish Hightongue. ‘Your father says you work in the Progressive head office? Bono.’ She declares this absently, as if remarking on an unfortunate hairdo. I’d be concerned if I couldn’t sense the cautiousness in her. ‘You’re veritous, Pierre. He glimmers max like you.’

Pierre Velox, Taye’s father, is well groomed and wearing just enough jewellery, including the obligatory gold rope drifting around his neck, to be the obvious complement of his wife – albeit slightly less dazzling or imperious, and bone pale as any ancestral Kinetic. ‘He’s more dictive,’ he says.

‘Mamá and Potentiary Velox were university amici,’ says Leonor, her tone a touch too high to be sincere.

‘With Niobe, veritly,’ Mamá adds with a finger raised from her glass. ‘Back then, we cogged we could change the world with dreams and entry-level academic treatises.’

‘And the occasional protest.’

‘Yes! Do you rewit the Vox Maximus riots? Niobe was a purr, wasn’t she? I’ll never unwit it. She had the max campus in a superious furore against Heinmark!’

‘It’s been too long, Patricia. And viz these bonoform children!’

‘How long has it been, veritly?’ asks Leonor with barely restrained facetiousness.

‘Twenty-five, twenty-six years? A year fore I had you,’ says Mamá. ‘After university, bits became more complicated, what with your wedding and … everybit drifting around it.’

Pierre nods, but I sense guardedness from him. I’m surprised he isn’t scrubbered. I try to sense more, but Taye’s feelings for his father are muddying my range. I have the urge both to hug someone and sulk.

Mamá downs what's left in her glass and says, 'I'm grateful for your help, Pierre. The Lightlys are the last people I need censoring me.' I thought she said she wasn't intimidated. What are they doing here?

Pierre acknowledges the compliment with a tilt of his glass. 'You're certain you don't want Kinetic protection? We have bodyguards to spare. Even for a day or two.'

'I'll be drifty,' Mamá says. Leonor's eye twitches. They must be screaming at each other's thoughts. 'Did you tell your brother about your promotion?'

Leonor responds while staring directly at Pierre, 'Assistant Director of Ambient Cognigraphy, I'm dicted.'

'Assistant Director? That's impressive, Leonor,' I say.

Taye, who has been behind me and quiet for a while, snaps, 'What was the price?'

'Price?' Pierre grumbles.

'There's alwise a price. Was it worth the price?'

Leonor's eyes are darting around, as she often does when she's sifting through cross-current thoughtstreams.

'What is Maman trying to torch up?' Taye asks. 'She obbed a Sensorial into a sham trial, dicted him to mentally interrogate her own son, and obbed the Sensorial's sister to a key strategic position in the organisation she cogs is captured by her enemies? What's the angle?'

'I taught you better than that, Taye,' Mamá says simply. 'Don't you rewit? At the top, all politics is personal and intimate.'

The liquid still in Pierre's glass is swirling kinetically into a tornado-shaped vortex. Leonor breaks the tense silence first. 'Wait, you've been ordered to mentally interrogate him? Like a sensorigraph? Did you consent to that, Taye?' Pierre bristles at her tone.

'Did any of us consent to the SIB's surveillance?' asks Taye in a rapid snide. 'The surveillance of the department you now help to direct, I should dict.'

I'm sure the tendril of menace I sense is coming from Pierre.

Leonor asks Mamá, 'How have you forgotten to mention your conexiones with Niobe and Pierre Velox?'

'It was an ideolomanistad,' replies Mamá.

'Bueno, your thoughts and *his*' – she includes Pierre with tilt of her head – 'suggest *much* more.'

'Do you want to talk about thoughts? Shall we reveal what your thoughts have been planning for the last few minutes?'

Pierre is smiling. I want to hit him. Or Taye does. There are too many hot ánimos in here. Pierre says, ‘There’s that Sensorial frankness I’ve missed for so long. It’s invigorating!’

‘It’s terrifying,’ mumbles Taye. Mamá looks at him sympathetically. Isabel’s ánimo is probing me. I feel her curiosity twisting at my nerves.

Leonor steps towards Pierre. ‘I should do a cognigraph, Potentiary Velox. I have the training. And cognigraphs are much more accurate than sensorigraphs.’

Taye’s thoughts must respond obscenely to the idea, because she and Mamá both turn to him quickly. Mamá then gives me a serious look and allows caution and anxiety to colour her feelingstream.

‘My wife asked for a sensorigraph from your brother,’ Pierre replies.

‘Pierre, old amicus,’ Mamá says, ‘Miguel’s pensario is leaking erratically at the moment. Let me take him to a guía in the Barrio to settle him, and he can obb back later refreshed and prepared.’

Pierre is suspicious. Mamá will read it too. He considers his glass for a while before saying, ‘Niobe dicted for this to be done today.’

‘It will be. But cred me, it will be a misread jumble of chaos if he performs the sensorigraph in this state.’

Pierre nods. Mamá makes a show of hugging him goodbye. Taye watches while his ánimo reaches for me. ‘Everyone else makes decisions for me,’ I whisper to him. ‘I’ll be back.’

‘Verit?’ he asks. He doesn’t want to be left alone here. His feelings retreat and brace. He and his world are eroding my agency so quickly, but I keep letting it happen. Somehow hugging him feels a betrayal, but I find myself clutching him despite it. Pierre’s ánimo is curious and alert.

Mamá and Leonor fight cognisciently all the way to the Mastery gate. I follow their feelingstreams frothing and jabbing and wounding. Isabel follows with her mouth agape. She’s too enamoured of this world. I ask her how they ended up at the Kinetic Mastery. She says she told Mamá about my summons to the Needle and Mamá insisted they come here immediately.

Mamá indicates verbally that she, Isabel and I need to find the nearest flybusstop – an absurd point in a suburb where few people use public transportation. Once we’re on the flywalk, out of earshot, at least in theory, of Pierre, Taye and their staff, Leonor remarks that she now has an official flycar for her use, in fact we aren’t welcome to use it, she doesn’t understand why she has the job, Niobe’s influence is meddlesome and furthermore I have gone completely insane.

‘The promotion is deserved, mija, even if you got it because Niobe Velox wants you in her debt,’ says Mamá.

‘What is going on, Mamá? I’ve never seen so much vague politicking, especially from you! I thought you hated my job,’ says Leonor.

‘This all started when you fiddled with the systems at the SIB. I’m just trying to manage the fallout so you and Miguel are protected. For whatever reason, the Vidente family is involved with the Veloxes again.’

‘Again? It would have helped to know how close you were with them,’ I say.

‘That was a long time ago, mijo. Niobe was very, very different back then. She was still considered a Barotic. She saw herself as Midburb! She was a creature of our movement. Now she’s – well, she’s a creature of the Kinetic world, of this insane area. Now, Isabel, niñera, and Miguel, mijo, let’s find the flybus. Enjoy your new flycar, mija.’

‘It’s a flying prison,’ says Leonor. The flycar in question, a blob of glistening black metal, has been brought to the flywalk for her. She regards it with nausea. ‘I broke the law and now I’m promoted. I don’t like any of this!’ She squints at Mamá, imparting some closing thoughts, before stepping nervously into her flying prison. I note, though, some thrill and satisfaction in her ánimo.

Mamá watches Leonor join the floating traffic. ‘I didn’t realise how far the conexión had evolved,’ she remarks almost absently.

‘He isn’t in love with me, is he?’ I ask. The phrasing is deliberately non-Sensorial.

‘He’s in heavy ansia,’ says Isabel. ‘It’s pouring from him.’ She’s picking at a fingernail.

‘But would he call it love?’ I ask.

‘There are so many kinds of love, presenciado.’

Mamá takes the question seriously and says, ‘Based on what I read, he wants to love you. But not in the way you may want.’ She looks back at the Mastery, gleaming sterilely in the pure sun up here at the top streetlevel. ‘Yet I can’t judge the heart like you can, only the mind’s chatter. I do think you need each other. Neither of you realises it yet. I’d prefer you stayed away from him, but now we have no choice. We are bound.’

‘Did you and Niobe plan this whole thing?’ I ask her.

She guffaws. ‘I’ve kept away from her for twenty-five years for a reason, Miguel,’ she says. Righteous indignation has always stuck to Mamá’s ánimo like a scar, a reminder of her activistic bent. But right now, the sensation is searing. ‘Ah, there’s the flybus stop.’

‘The Veloxes could have called us a flycab home. Wouldn’t it have been safer?’ I ask. But her ánimo flickers with deception and a bit of excitement. We aren’t going home.

Chapter 15

My concerns peak when we've changed flybuses for the fourth time, diverting along a route from an Aquial district back towards Loftry, then travelling the Ring Flypath. Only then does Mamá lead us through a heaving pedestrian interchange to a vehicle headed downwards. We're given plenty of stares on this trip. The cabin is a space of thick, protective Lowtongue, yet Mamá looks delighted, even lifted by the juxtaposition.

'So, we're going to the Lowburbs,' I say. There's a lot of neon writing in non-Latin scripts outside the windows. Not much sunlight gets down this low.

'Clearly,' is all Mamá says.

Isabel's awkwardness ripples with my own, but she's trying admirably to look comfortable. 'I didn't realise you knew your way around the Lowburbs, padralta,' she says.

Mamá grins and tries to listen in on a political argument in the seats in front. There's plenty of anger towards the main caucuses, it seems.

By the time Mamá signals it's time to get off, we've spent nearly an hour travelling in cramped and linguistically unsettling craft. As soon as the doors open, I'm blasted by the intense angry sentido común throbbing throbbing sore fresh pulsing and pulling pulsing and pulling tense throbbing throbbing

strangers

'Ignore it,' Mamá says with unnerving calm. She's looking around the street market we've arrived at with familiarity. 'What you interpret as tension is just vibrancy.'

'I assume the pensado común here sounds vibrant in your head too,' I say.

'I'd call it spicy.'

Stalls of magialised food, dubiously potent pets and crystal gadgets are crammed next to each other under flickering projections, moving vines and the fluffy pink lights of magial flies. There's a whole bazaar of supposedly imported crystals advertising spurious benefits. The headlamps and heat blurs of the flypaths from the seven streetlevels above cast a mix of shadow and glow on the scene. Food is being packed into carts for export to the upper streetlevels. There's a stream of Cryonic workers, maybe from a factory nearby, having lunch at counters outside a Botanial growery. Everywhere I look, a flash of a gold uniform reveals the Guard, standing by crowded corners, hovering over stalls, sometimes thinning traffic, pyreguns always

visible. I'm not used to seeing so many of them around, even in the Needle, though they don't look like Upperburbers.

'It's not seedy,' says Mamá, once again, uninvitedly, interpreting my thoughtstream. 'Light can't reach down here because of urban planning, not because the culture is clandestine.'

'That's not what I thought.' I'm rubbing my arms together instinctively against the throbbing throbbing tension the tired agitation weary

strangers

midders

Mamá cuts through a crowd that has gathered around three Neo-Druid missionaries. They're projecting their voices over crystalpods held too close to their mouths, giving their screeds a tinny quality. Just before the audience turns on the preachers' frail efforts at proselytising and I nearly tumble into the heady feelingstream again, Mamá turns down an alley.

The wind is icy. There are hundreds of feet of sheer building facade above us. We pass people smoking glowing purple sage. The drug fogs my magiary in a moment of bliss.

Mamá finds a nondescript metal door that she has to yank a few times before it grinds open. She wipes her hands and says to Isabel, 'Turn right at the main street there and go into the brewery.' Mamá reads Isabel's protest before she can speak. 'I know, I know. Miguel needs to see something that I cannot share yet, niñera. The brewery is very safe. And it will give you an education into politics that you will never get in fancy Midburb crowds. You need to hear them.'

Isabel is hurt and enraged and spends a few moments trying to decide which to channel. 'Fine!' she spits eventually. 'We will reassess this padraltería. Magon knows *he* doesn't care anymore.' She tries to storm off, but she's so uncomfortable with her surroundings that it looks like a sulk more than anything else.

Mamá closes her eyes and says, 'Is intimañía really too much to ask with her? It's not that far from presencia.'

'Right now, I'm too confused and tired to litigate all my conexiones, Mamá. Why does everyone have an agenda all of a sudden?' I ask.

'All of a sudden?' Mamá chuckles as she steps inside.

The brickwork of the dimly lit passage is ancient – and it seems to whisper, quite literally. These walls could have centuries of sensoricaptured emotionalia in them.

Through another door, we enter a Botanial growery. Rows of shelves are crammed with trays and jars of small plants with the signature gold sheen of magial petals. Tiny lightballs hover above the saplings, as do little screens with statistics I can't interpret. At the room's centre,

squeezed between two high shelves of ferns, is a metal table on which dozens of vials and tubes have been neatly placed. There's a small crystalslab above which a globule of purple liquid is rotating, steam swirling off it gently. Tiny veins of gold are starting to web through it. They must be extracting ambrosia.

'Have you been moonlighting as a drug cultivator?' I ask Mamá.

'Wait here,' she says, nodding towards a plastic chair by the table. She types on her crystalpod as she leaves through another door. When it opens, I hear a rumble of cheery voices, clinking glass and high-pressure steam. Someone calls, 'Proffa! It been long!'

The crystalslab surface displays text, maybe an academic article. It's incongruous somehow in here.

Mamá returns about a minute later. Behind her, a young man – close to my age – appears between the shelves. At first, I think it's Taye. Same height, same walnut skin, same narrow face and proud brows. He's wearing black entirely, except for a green logo on his shirt with the words 'DUNAIDA BREWERY' in old font. His eyes are tired but interrogative. As he moves, the lightballs near the shelves cause his hair to glint in the verdant metallic shine of a Botanial.

He stops just before us and sways into a slight backwards lean, keeping his arms folded. 'This be him?' he asks. His voice is on the edge of a yawn.

'Yeah, this be m'boy,' says Mamá.

The corner of his mouth lifts slightly and he releases a single burst of a breathy chuckle. 'He look like a raw Upper, Proffa. What you been grow?'

Mamá laughs, 'He be better than m'girl, hear.' There's familiarity between them.

'He speak Lo?' the man asks.

'Yeah, but bad-like.'

'M'Lo be raw-like,' I say.

The man laughs with energy now. He flops into the chair across from me. When he sees the crystalslab is still on, he quickly swipes the display off.

'He been meet Taye. He need a know,' says Mamá.

I'm starting to reach the limits of my energy reserves. 'Mamá, I've been pushed around by enough people today. What is going on? Who is this man?'

A cheer comes from behind the door – the customer side of Dunaida Brewery, though what exactly they brew here would be of interest to authorities. That ambrosia is a potion. Very illegal.

‘Ress, m’brumma,’ the man says. His torso tips almost enough to make him look like he’s lying down. His head lolls forwards, but his eyes are alert. They bore. He pulls his lower lip over his top teeth and, for the briefest moment, his eyes trace my chest. ‘You be Feeler, chime?’

‘Sentient,’ I correct.

‘What-like you name it. Y’mother not been say that she come here much-like? Clear-like, you not see Lowers much.’

‘Flow, Kehinde,’ Mamá sighs.

‘Sorry, Proffa. He be juss too Midder.’

A giggle bursts from my chest, just as he smirks. I try to convert the channelled emotion into a cough, but it’s too late. He looks like a triumphant toddler.

‘Kehinde,’ Mamá repeats. ‘Flow. This be raw-like. You can say anything a him. He muss know. For me.’

Kehinde looks away for a while, lingering on the blank crystalslab. ‘Bono, my superious secret, vir,’ he says. His jaw loosens into a liquid Hightongue accent. It isn’t taut like the Kinetics I’ve met, but there’s something rich about it, egoic and detached. ‘As your mother dicted, my name is Kehinde. The name my mother borrowed from an Impotent culture that gleamly wasn’t hers. Bono, she borrows anybit for her politics. Who wits if it’s verit?’ He pauses. ‘In the culture from which the name is obbed, it refers to a second twin.’ Kehinde’s emotions start to churn. There’s pain there. ‘Voy on, vir. Dosh up.’

He speaks so loosely, but what he’s implying can’t possibly be obvious. I look to Mamá for help, but she says nothing.

In shade and feel, in the way it sits in my bones, Kehinde’s ánimo is familiar. I can’t deny that. But this is still absurd. ‘No …’ I say.

‘Don’t you feel it?’

‘There’s no way,’ I say. ‘You don’t – you and Taye Velox cannot be *twins*.’

‘Not identical twins, gleamly. But we are, veritly. Born same day and everybit. Grew juxt. Until I left that hellscape.’

His bitterness spins in me brings something closer flicker a memory something can’t quite place this …

‘How come I’ve never heard this before? It would be common knowledge. You … you grew up in that house, that famous house? The media would talk about you endlessly.’

‘You cog my mother can’t huff the press up? Even in opposition, they censor as she dicts them to.’

‘For what, twenty-something years? How even? But wait …’ I lean towards him as if a closer view will reveal some glitch, but all it does is sharpen the feelingstream. ‘Taye’s Kinetic. Niobe’s Kinetic. Pierre’s Kinetic. The whole family is Kinetic. Heching powerful Kinetics, at that. Niobe’s magiary is infamous! And Taye’s magiary scares the Magon out of me. If you’re his twin brother, how are you a Botanial?’

Mamá groans. ‘It happens all the time. You know that. It’s just not spoken about. And you’re forgetting Niobe was born into a Barotic family. We keep in our synods and it only makes magiaries seem stably genetic.’

‘But it’s so fundamental to Niobe Velox’s story, Mamá. It’s her brand. It’s her politics. Of all people, she’d understand a child born with a different magiary. Why hide it?’

‘You want to sense what she’s like?’ Kehinde asks. He holds his hand out across the table. ‘I can show you. Sense what you want.’

When I don’t move, he smiles. His lips curve in the same vain way as Taye’s. His eyes seethe like Taye’s too. His body lilts similarly. They just handle pain so differently. Kehinde likes to keep it nearby. Taye runs.

I rub my eyes. ‘You said you left?’

‘I was eighteen,’ he says. Something flickers across my mind agony old fleeting a memory maybe a gulf fight breach parent and child Niobe and other …

‘They tried to change my magiary,’ he’s saying. I can only stare back. His ánimo is alive on his skin now, gestured without restraint. He considers me for a long while. Then, deciding the outburst is worth it, he starts inveighing. ‘They couldn’t accept that their son was Botanial, a feeble Lowburber, a sign that her Kineticity might be flawed, so they obbed me to therapists, doctors, Neo-Druid priests, even some befucked Sensorial guías. Once, they pumped raw magium, spiked to the Kinetic range, directly into my blood.’ He rubs a thumb over his arm. His eyes thunder with the feelingstream. ‘Chemical reempowerment, they dicted it. So, yes, I voyed away as soon as I could. I broke her narrative.’

His ánimo surges so strongly I catch an image almost resolves a man no not man

a boy

screaming defiant against this fucking wall niobe velox

you’re always so confused kehinde just voy out

after everybit we’ve done for you so much always so much hurt

much pain so much fucking—

Mamá's hand on my shoulder pulls me from the feelingstream. I grip the edge of the table to steady myself, breathing heavily.

Kehinde is fascinated by this. 'You been feel everything I juss been feel self-wise?'

'I'm fine, Mamá,' I mumble. 'Déjame.' Kehinde lets the memory fold back behind his immediate thoughts.

I've had enough of the Velox family's psyche leaking into me. 'I haven't sensed any of this from your brother.'

His eyes are electric. 'Interesting. Taye is superious at burying.'

'And where do you come into this picture?' I ask Mamá.

'The university,' she says. 'Kehinde was part of a group of Lowburb students who were given aid to study the arts two years ago. He was in one of those outreach classes. I'd known his parents, of course, from when they were married. And I remembered him and Kehinde being born. Very clearly. I remember that green hair when he was a baby. And I remembered Niobe's … complicated feelings about it.' Kehinde is thumbing the edge of the table. 'She was happy to be born in the Barotic Synod and rise above it, but Kehinde represented something even she and her sanitised story couldn't comprehend: a sinking, a falling back. When Kehinde walked into my class, his pensario was loud and bright and so much like his mother's.'

'My pensario was like hers? You rekenned it?' Kehinde asks.

Mamá nods. How she has managed to keep all this from me (and, more to the point, from her professional cognigrapher daughter) is the key question. What is becoming clearer is why she had stopped being so friendly with Niobe and Pierre, what the breach must have been in their conexión. Magon knows the conversations they were having back then about the inconvenient Botanial in the divine family and how Niobe of all people should have understood how magiaries appear in the most random places.

Mamá leans over to reach the crystalslab and swipes the display on. The unfinished article reappears. 'Have you ever read Descender's work?' she asks me.

'Descender? Isn't he a really niche critic?' I reply.

She expands the floating screen and gestures it to float next to Kehinde. He grins.

'Because you descended from the burbs above? Revolutionary name,' I say.

'Have you read his work?' Mamá repeats.

'Nah, Proffa,' Kehinde says. 'Y'son onny read Upper texx, onny high shit. Descender be too Low for him. Too mess-like.'

'You write in Hightongue, Kehinde. Don't push it.'

‘So, is he your niñero? Was Isabel not enough?’ I ask her. ‘How many padralterías are you handling?’

‘She’s my pastorañera,’ says Kehinde. The Sensorial term is wrong in his mouth.

Mamá considers her response with squinted eyes. ‘All we’ve done is contribute to critical discourses,’ she says.

Without question, she’s been doing more, much more. I don’t even know if I’m surprised.

‘Isn’t it bizarre for a Midburber academic and a Botanial who was raised Kinetic to be preaching liberation to Lowburbers?’ I ask. Kehinde’s ánimo zaps. ‘So now I know all of this. Why did I need to know?’

‘You needed context,’ says Mamá.

‘And you’re clearly good at hiding your feelings from me, so how can I be sure that’s all you wanted?’

‘I like this vir,’ Kehinde interrupts.

‘I sense *exactly* how you like me,’ I say. He traces his bottom lip over his teeth again. Before his ánimo moves towards something I may want to reciprocate, I stand up. ‘So, I have context. It doesn’t change Plenipotentiary Velox’s instructions. All it does is prove that we’ve got too entangled and you’ve been advocating for a caucus that’s built on its leader’s hypocrisy.’

‘Only in the absence of more radical alternatives,’ says Mamá.

‘You won’t escape them,’ Kehinde adds. ‘You can only run from them.’

‘How much has my mother told you about what your mother asked me to do?’

‘Nil.’ He knows I sense the lie.

I want to be angry, but his ánimo, strange as it still sits in me, is too broken for me not to treat him empathically. ‘Kehinde, your childhood must have been horrific. I sense it, so those aren’t just words. I’m sorry. I don’t know what to say otherwise. Mamá, I need to get back up seven streetlevels. Alone, mejor.’

She nods. ‘Divert a few times so you’re sure you’ve not been followed. I’ll show Isabel some more real political arenas down here. She’ll hate them,’ she says.

‘Followed? Niobe knows her son lives down here, surely, and that you come here. I don’t know what you thought you were doing getting involved in this crusade, Mamá, but you didn’t have to drag me into it too.’

‘How is Taye?’ Kehinde’s voice breaks when he pronounces his brother’s name, single-syllabled like Taye does.

‘In a mess of his own.’

I leave them to their illegal potioneering and preachy writing, and brace for a tedious return through public transport. I've become far too entangled. What I need to do is get the information Niobe wants and get out of that world. As quickly and cleanly as possible.

Chapter 16

I don't take my mother's advice to change flybuses frequently, but even on a direct route upwards I see at least three protests, one of which feels ready to break into violence. Taye's world floats above all that. And here I am, literally rising to him above the streetlevels of his lessers. And wondering why I'm allowing myself to be so managed and manoeuvred by the people around me.

Outside the Kinetic Mastery, Leonor is leaning against the slick chassis of her new flycar and glowering at the building before her. So much for leaving. 'So, you know?' she asks.

'Know what, hermana?'

She sips from a canister. 'Mamá's big secret.' There's excitement in her ánimo: she's been waiting for this conversation, possibly for a very long time. I shouldn't be surprised.

'You both have had big secrets, which you both have been frighteningly good at concealing from the Sensorials around you,' I reply. 'Are you here to spy on the Veloxes or on me?'

'I could spy on them from headquarters,' she says. 'I'm standing out here to let them know I'm watching them, not following every order they give.' She swirls her cup and tips the contents right at the gate. 'Mamá is playing with fire.'

'Do you actually know what the big secret is?'

She sighs. 'I know she's been doing something in the Lowburbs. She really thought I hadn't noticed. The question is, why did she reveal it to you, not me? And why now? What connection does it have to the psychodrama happening in that house? Mamá's been dodging and deflecting my cogniscience for years. The woman is a master at deception. No wonder I became a cognigrapher.' Our ánimos wink into childhood for a second.

'I honestly don't know why she showed me,' I say. 'Or why she risked showing me.' Unless the point was to have Niobe's staff monitor our way down to Kehinde. 'Mamá has an agenda. Like everyone else on this fucking island. At least with Niobe Velox, I know what she wants and where I stand in relation to it.'

Leonor nods and gestures towards the gate, behind which is a silver-plated flycar. 'She arrived home an hour ago. She expected the sensorigraph to be done already.'

'Did you read that cognisciently or intuit it?'

‘Her staff think loudly. Taye’s leaking really grotesque thoughts. That man’s psyche is seriously disturbing.’ She inclines her ánimo towards wanting to swap places with me.

‘You know they’ll get their due from you, right?’ I say. ‘You can stand outside here all you want, but you’re trapped in their schemes. You’re more exposed than I am. They have leverage over you. You’re in their system.’

‘And there’s no way this sensorigraph is the last they’ll want from you, either. Come to think of it, there’s no way you’re really here just for a sensorigraph. Mamá has made sure our two families are connected. I can’t work out why yet, but there’s a reason. Also,’ she says, gesturing her flycar door to slide open, ‘you’re far too keen on almanistad with him. You’re a willing tool. Even to him. Just be careful, mi hermano. I can’t see where all of this is leading yet and he doesn’t know how dangerous being around him is.’

A little string of tenderness shoots between us, though it’s muddled by plenty of suspicion and anxiety. I don’t like the dynamic emerging.

I’m a wreck. I’m exhausted from being pulled across the webs of Niobe and Leonor and Mamá and Kehinde and Sabrador and who knows who else. It’s all overlapping agendas. At the centre, as has been the case for weeks now, is Taye Velox, who I find sitting on a bench in a study, staring out a large window, stewing in the emotions he knows must surface.

It felt weird getting easy access to this high-security residence. Doors opened. Staff gestured me through. My presence was expected and affirmed. I’m being watched, physically or otherwise. I probably was followed down to the Lowburbs and back up again. Niobe could already know that I’ve met her estranged son.

Taye’s ánimo is thick, almost a viscous liquid of muddled numbness and nerves – so much so that the room feels electric. When I enter, his eyes search me for a single moment, but then he brightens, though only superficially: I feel the energy it takes him to construct the pretence. For the first time in a while, I have reason not to be fully open with him, yet he can’t not be open with me. That’s the deal with my magiary. I could tell him where I’ve been, who I’ve met, what I know, but how would that influence what I need to do? Can I even trust that Taye wouldn’t use it against me? He is his mother’s son, after all. Politics has scrambled what was never clear.

‘Was your guía helpful?’ he asks. The smile is weak but sincere.

It takes a moment for me to remember the lie. ‘Yes. What I needed. Let’s get this over with, as much as your emotions want to stall.’

He manages a nod and the brightness fades. ‘My parents have been insufferable all afternoon. They want me at the final election rally tonight.’

He looks vulnerable. The access my magiary gives me to him makes us feel closer than we are. My body tells me this closeness means a connection has been forged over time and sharing and bonding, but it’s a mirage. Even so, I feel his trust in me rooting itself in my core. He shouldn’t be so naive. I should never have come back here. This man allowed his own brother to be ostracised. At a minimum, he consented to the coverup.

‘Why did your father let me go earlier?’ I ask him.

The question distracts him. ‘You’re trying too hard to viz the reason behind everybit. Politics doesn’t glide like that.’

‘He let me go because of politics?’

‘I don’t wit,’ he sighs. ‘I don’t ask why people do what they do around here, especially him. You never get verit answers. Why are you worried about it?’

‘I don’t know,’ I say as I sit next to him. ‘Maybe I’m just getting paranoid.’

‘I don’t blame you. Imagine growing up in my family,’ he says, clueless that I know too well. ‘This part of the Mastery is quiet, but you should wit that my mother has ways to watch us if she wants.’ Now that I’m swimming through his ánimo, I sense again its similarity to Kehinde’s. They both feel fully and fitfully. ‘You wit, I’ve bonded around so much with you recently. Miranda has tried so max to get as much time from me. She’ll be so jealous. You drifty?’ he asks. It’s the closest to a verbal expression of affection as I think Taye can express. He rubs his hands on his legs and cheers, ‘So how is this done?’

‘I’m not exactly sure, to be honest,’ I say. ‘It could get intense, so you should get comfortable.’ He nods quickly to indicate he’s considered this. I add, ‘And … the connection is strongest when there’s physical contact. Skin to skin.’ He reaches a hand to me. ‘Technically the strongest connection is through the chest, near the heart.’

Without hesitation, he kineticks the buttons of his shirt open, then floats the fabric away, leaving his chest bare, save for the necklace, a spinning gleam against his skin. His chest is heaving.

This close to Taye, his ánimo pulses through me each beat of his heart washing into mine my body his rhythm and sense and timbre one note trust thick thick beneath …

Pushing to stay afloat, I say, ‘Bring the memory of the incident to mind. I don’t know what I’ll sense, but I’ll try to make sense of it, maybe even see what happened.’

I hear the sound of vibrating glass. Something snaps nearby. I don’t turn to it.

‘Bono,’ he breathes. ‘Do it.’

I move so I’m facing Taye sideways. Then, with the effort of wading through thick water, I move one hand just above his heart and the other to his back to support the flow.

The memory shudders briefly, wincing from my sight. But Taye keeps it steady.

I touch his chest pulse bursts one song guilt heaves back rears pulls too much too much too much bring up Taye I am here now go there here

and

not here

johannesburg

Feelingstream

the feelingstream surges and ebbs

rushes and weaves

turns through time runs back then dives in again

flowing through hurt so much back then

but not before

before just living not thriving never thriving of course

but none of us enjoyed societal service

taye's ánimo pulls pulls away but we have to go there have to face it face the pain of flashes

flashes flashes

not yet

go

back

context

taye's voice

he remembers

I remember

I rewit

you merge around with the midburbers miguel, not my crowd, you keep away, some try, there's an aquial you're amici with, can't rewit her name, she tries to insert herself into our circles, societal service is the one time you can try that, cramming us all together, you're the obedient ones, voy on observation trips, submit the work, toe the line, classic midburbers –

what you don't wit miguel is how the upperburbers bond around when you're not there, I don't wit at first, but it's gleamly quick, we're drinking or doing hardcore scapesage juxt, you ken the type, in a dorm, and someone says they have firm stuff, and they bring out befucked impotent whiskey, genuine stuff too, or sweets, they obb up often, I cog it's exterious at first, but I realise it's the vibe with them, you wit how upperburbers are, keep to ourselves and find ways to live superiously –

gleamly, one day this pyrrhic vir, magnus coaler, you met him, veritly, at club pique, rewit – he calls me to his dorm and dicts to me that there's a network, exclusively upperburbers from the highest families, and that they can obb whatever I want from the magial isle, now you need to undercog that magnus is max connected, the vir's glouw's nephew or somebit, he kens everyone, he dicts that the people in the upperburb synods have connections, I cog it's normal, I wit, fra, you'd dict this is typical, and you're veritous, those networks grease the wheels wherever we go, but he vizzes me exteriously for a moment, checking me I cog, I rewit his beard is smoking max, and he dicts, softwise, that the impotent stuff comes from special channels – he's testing me, I can tell, checking my loyalties, I don't wit what to dict him, so I just dict drifty, I don't care, fack what ye want, but he dicts, strongwise, taye your mother would want you in on the trade –

fra I don't wit what's happening, I wit you don't cred that, but I'm confused, what the omnifuckery would my mother want with impotent alcohol and food? and that's putting aside the max illegality of it, you rewit how secure that base is, we're there to viz the impotentate, observe the people who would destroy us if they kenned our existence, contact is the worst thing that could happen, it would violate all the treaties, all the laws at the foundation of the society, the reason for our exile, and my mother has connections, verit, but she's in the wrong caucus, and glouw's the master in power at the grand mastery, my mother is capable of max, but this is too dusky, too exterious, but he dicts there's a deal obbing up soon, and they could use a kinetic for my magiary, and he dicts to me, plenipotentiary velox would want you there, I ask him how he wits that, but he just dicts it's how things are huffed up over there –

I don't agree to anybit, but days later, summer I rewit, we've just voyed back from an observation, the flybus is clearing, but magnus dicts not to get off, the supervisors leave, the guard, everyone except magnus, a luminent sor, gina, who I've fucked a few times, I admit, and the driver, barotic vir I cog, the doors close, and the driver pulls the flybus into the ground again –

I'm furious, haven't agreed to this, now I'm being obbed out of the base, without guard, into the impotentate –

he flies us to an area I haven't vizzed before, it's in the city, max urban part, run down, driver parks the flybus at the top of a building, right on the roof, keeps the bubblefield on so no one vizzes but we're on a roof, right there, in the open, and he opens the befucked doors –

my heart is jolting against my ribs, can't cred it, magnus and gina walk out, sliply, out of the bubblefield, appearing in the impotentate, visible, like they're not just violating the most essential law of the society –

you wit what I notice first? the smell, it's so different from the isle and the base and the air in the flybuses in the potentate, it's gritty, metallic, like the air is thick with something I can't see, smells like history, and the ground on that roof is concrete and crumbling, not like the lowburbs, not the old kind of crumbling, but the decay of newer material that isn't made like we make it – the driver has a big bag with him, they dict to move quickly, or the impotents will viz us appear out of the air from the invisible flycar, I cog they may already have vizzed us – they go through a door and down musty stairs with dark red paint that's crumbling and cracking, then down passages, there are sounds behind each door, loud entertainments, talking, shouting, most in the tongues of the city that only the academics undercog, you rewit the ones –

they stop at a door, 641, I can't unwit that number, 641, magnus knocks, there's shouting, and then it opens –

it's a young vir, a boy veritly, maybe 16 or 17, and it's an impotent kid, he's vizzing us, veritly vizzing us potents, in person, I cog I'll spend my life in jail, my mother will disown me, the son of the master of the kinetic synod is interacting with a real, live impotent, in the impotentate, it's cardinal –

but the boy recognises them, nods, sharp, he dicts, exterious word, gina has luminated so she gleams max attractive, the boy likes her, it's clear, is your father in? asks magnus, bruh your accent, he dicts, shaking his head, laughing, dad! they're here! I have to concentrate to undercog him, it's english but not, like midtongue but also not – he lets us in, gestures to a tiny room as if that's all there is, it's crammed with impotent exteria, food boxes, bags, contraptions I've vizzed from afar but never in person, there's a huge screen but it's fixed in a long black box – when the kid vizzes me, he tips his head up and dicts, eita, he looks at magnus and gina, back to me as if there's some solidarity between him and me, might be we look juxt, same hue, not like magnus and gina, I don't wit, I want to reply, but I don't wit what to dict without sounding exterious to him, bruh you dripping with that necklace, damn! thank the magon I wasn't hovering it, I tuck it behind my shirt, he has a necklace too I viz, not kinetic gleamly, I can't cred I'm interacting with this impotent, do they wit what we are? –

the boy's father comes in from another room, looks like he just woke up, when he vizzes magnus and gina, he's scared, his eyes move to the boy but he looks drifty – the driver steps forward and opens the bag in front of the father, it's filled with small bottles, tinctures of pale gold, diluted raw magium, the father nods appreciatively, dicts somebit to the boy in a tongue I don't undercog, the boy voys to the other room and comes back with a big cardboard box, setting it down in front of magnus, filled with packs of impotent tech, smartphones they dict them, I cog, they're primitive things, there must be hundreds in there, I recognise the brand logo, an apple, the wealthier impotents have them here, the father picks up one of the vials, holds it up to the electric light to viz it clearly, opens it and places a drop on his tongue – I flinch but gina warns me not to move, his eyes roll to the back of his head and he groans, long and max, deal? he asks, thank you for the business as always, dicts magnus, the boy is already absorbed in his smartphone, he doesn't gleam worried that his father just dosed on raw magium –

what the fuck are they facking here? I'm befucked, exposed and visible to these impotents, even when we're back in the flybus, back inside the bubblefield and nominally invisible again, it feels wrong still –

I confront magnus, ye've been giving magium to impotents! ye can't! ye've been dicting with them? interacting with them? showing yourselves to them? the whole fucking point of the society is to keep us away from them, invisible to them, we only obb out here to watch them so they don't find us ever again! I'm screaming screaming at him fist in his face he but doesn't care, what's your problem vir? he keeps asking, gina whines at me, but you benefit! where did you think our tech came from? we didn't invent crystalpods, I viz in confusion, magnus rolls his eyes, burns his beard at me, it's impotent tech idiot, quantics can't quantise those microchips and shit, so the synods, the upperburb synods, they viz the latest impotent technology and obb it to the isle so they can copy it, find the ideas, the tech, and in exchange we give the impotents what they want – magium? raw befucked magium? it's toxic to them! I yell I scream I'm delirious spinning in the flybus, please you already wist about magium smuggling, not authorised by our own leaders! why do you care about impotents? magnus asks, their ancestors wanted to purge us from existence, what are they to you? –

I avoided them for weeks, tried anywise, took refuge in miranda, she presented her body and her clan and I sank into the distraction, I wist magnus and gina still facked their runs, I vizzed them stay on the flybus late, I wist the base leaders were involved too or at least bribed to say nil –

but maman fucking maman pinged me, dicted to join the missions, dicted it was important that I wist how bits worked and she felt maxxer if I was there because the pyrrhics and luminents couldn't be credded and who wist what they'd fack with the tech if it didn't obb through kinetic hands too, I had to viz the dirt underneath my privilege, I was so so fucking outraged my own mother what was she cogging? the society was built on layers of lies, I kept rewitting the kid, the impotent boy, his father was dosing magium that could

kill him, his body couldn't handle magium, no impotent's body can, that's the whole befucked point of the society verit? that boy was involved now, systems so far beyond him had conspired to make his father a mule –

I juxted them again, I had to, dicted magnus I'd changed my mind, which I hadn't, but he nodded like he wist this would happen, planned the next drop, if only if only so many things hadn't happened taye's ánimo lurches away from the memory retreating through rings of pain and brittle shells away from what happened not wanting to go there

I can't I can't I can't
not there anybit but there
you wit enough
you wit
the ánimo hovers waits throbs and weaves then senses me senses the safety
and dives
dives
back
back
to that day
a saturday

night, we've had a night observation, stayed on the flybus like last time, flew out over johannesburg, electric lights prick beneath us, it's a hot night, I rewit, the heat sticks in the air –

when we obb back on that roof, the smells hit me again, the metallic distinction of a world that churns out production maxxer than we could even with quantics, the city feels different at night too, sirens from their police cars, impotent music, beat-based and ripping, everywhere, we pass a couple in the passageway, they look in love, a man delivering food in a plastic packet –

461, magnus knocks, the boy opens, he has something in his ears, white bubbles, dad, it's them! he smiles clumsily at gina's shimmered looks, ignores magnus, tips his head at me like fore, my guy, he dicts –

the father's been drinking somebit from a long bottle, eyes are unfocused, gents see I couldn't get the exact supply nê? supplier fell through, if you come back next week, I promise, guys, I promise, I'll hook you up, you'll have what you need, I'll give you, I'll give you – he shows us a box, smaller than last time, with only a few smartphones, these are old models, dicts magnus – please, the man dicts, please, me I'm just asking, just maybe give me one bottle, a little one for these and then next week, next week I promise gents, you'll have what you need, I'm begging, guys – fuck this, dicts magnus, he's trying hard not to let his pyrrhicity show, it's gleamly, he walks to the door – please, please, I'm begging, just one, just one bottle, please! the father cries desperately, one bottle! please! he's sobbing now, runs at the driver, pulls at the bag, just one! just one! he keeps dicting, the driver tries to push him off but he's relentless, gina's frozen, I can't use my magiary, what do we fack? magnus grabs the man and rips him away, throwing him to the floor, dad! calls the boy –

the man launches up so quickly magnus's hair flashes bright but he stops it at once, the man's holding something in his hand, a weapon, okay give it to me, he dicts, give me the bag – don't be stupid, dicts magnus – the father motions for his son to move behind him, I didn't want it to come to this but here we are, hand over the bag and you can go, no one gets hurt – magnus and gina look at each other, calculating – now! screams the father – gina flashes a searing white luminence, there are screams and stumbling magnus and gina are rushing for the door driver too father jumps grabs for the bag but fire erupts from nowhere then a bang

the bang

the bang

so loud so so loud I can't viz then another and another and I'm running and

he grabs my leg and

I crash to the floor and

scramble

gun inches from my face

bang

blood so much blood mine not mine not the … the …

screams magnus pulling father sobbing wailing over his … his … his …

the boy

the boy

the boy

screams my screams too he's dying he's dying he's dying

I kineticked the bullet deflected it away

I did that I did

my magiary

me

how is

a boy

a boy a child

magnus pulls me I reach out reach something snaps in my hand a strap a watch

his watch

and the stream surges in grief on griefs

guilt under guilt and pain pain pain so much blood

me

I did it

I facked it

verit

ánimo a deluge it rips and tears agony and fury pulling away away

from the memory

back through the layers

but there's something else here a later memory a small moment

forgotten in all the grief and scapesage and even seersage

too small too plain

but now I see it in the stream

taye sees it too

senses it

lives it

a clear moment

magnus, that fucking monster, in a corridor at the base, dicting hushed and excited, it's drifty taye, he dicts, it's all been huffed up, thank your mother for us, he leaves, doesn't dict anymore, leaves that statement hanging, doesn't dict to me until I'm back on the isle at club pique but

taye sees the memory couldn't understand at the time didn't want to know

didn't want to admit that the truth was there all this time

couldn't grasp who would fix the problem

his mother

always his mother

Part III

Chapter 17

The world heaves on its axis heaves through my chest my heart thrashes squeezes through breathing floor wall black light crashing over the heaving the ánimo Taye's ánimo is everywhere within me is me we pull apart but he's still here he's within … within …

There are books everywhere. Paper and spine have been ripped apart, strewn about the floor. The window has blown out. Freezing Loftry air is whipping around. It's night, somehow. How long were we stuck in that feelingstream?

I'm on the floor. And scraped. A bit. We've somehow ended up in the middle of the room, cocooned around what looks like a field of debris. Taye's close, on his knees, arms wrapped fiercely around his head. Foetal and prayer-like. His ánimo is a wail of exhaustion and raw relieved wounding around a stripped bleeding guilt. I feel it. I grieve into it. It's in me and of me now. I sense his energy in my muscles, his agony through my core, his guttural shame through my nerves and arms and fingers, but also something of relief, a lightness he wants to grasp but doesn't, can't feel worthy of it.

A series of pops echo outside the window. They pull Taye from the reverie, and me from the reverie. His eyes are bloodied.

Now something roars outside. It's too disconnected from our joint feeling, too far away, but Taye feels he needs to focus. 'Something's happening,' he croaks. 'Where's …'

'You kineticked this all …' I croak back. The effort makes me dizzy. 'There.' I point to his crystalpod glowing near the door. It flips into the air, whips to Taye's fingers. He wasn't looking. He's surprised. He didn't do that. Glances at me. Something's … wrong. He … feels me moving through him, making space in his – 'Soul. I feel you,' he says aloud, then how do I why am I you're here it'll ease I tell him he hears me tell him no not hears he feels it feels the sensation of ease my need for him to know it to more pops … 'Pyreshotfire?' one of us asks. We unnerve. We're coalescing still. I try to pull my ánimo from the sticky web. Maybe we're too bonded? Is this how you always feel? Is this what it's like? Taye tries to tap on his crystalpod but he's too bleary. It takes him a while. Panic whippers between us. 'Protest in the Lowburbs. They're moving to the Needle. It's max. Apparently.'

'What time is it?'

'Nine.'

‘We were out for … *hours*. Hours of—’

He feels the conexión dimming from the heat it was. He’s relieved but not. He looks at me, safe but unmoored. More pops. They’re coming from far down. There are sirens too. ‘That’s a protest?’

He’s rubbing his eyes to see the text. ‘It’s a few thousand people. I felt it,’ he says, his voice quavering over the words. ‘I felt what you were feeling, in the moment, while you were feeling it. I vizzed those memories, felt them again. Relived.’

I nod. He senses me coiling around the truth I discovered – we discovered – what Magnus had told him, what he really did know deep down, but he couldn’t face it and ran from it so hard. The space between us sears with a line of fury. His jaw is clenched and his ánimo is starting to seethe. ‘I felt you … feeling through me,’ he says. ‘Discovering.’ His tone arcs into gasped tearfulness, and his ánimo and mine lift into song, into an intimacy so emphatic and full and unhindered that we expect blisters but find only each other in each other. He sits there and watches me, watches and stays, only his chest in motion.

He wants to keep the thing hidden, but it’s been unearthed and seen, so now there’s anger and fury in the exposure. He’s trying to keep it away, but it’s incorrigible. ‘I never wist,’ he mutters. ‘I mean, I did. If I’d just listened to what he dicted. She huffed it up, covered it up.’

‘I know. Taye, what are y—’

Suddenly we’re walking. Marching. Books spray away from us. The doors swerve open. I know where to go. The house is as familiar to me as my own. We run up the circling staircase. The door to a small office is slightly ajar. It’s Niobe’s home office, which I know. A couple of aides are in the hallway outside with crystalslabs shining stats and video feeds I can’t make out. Taye walks right up to them, flicks his hand and lets the door tear itself from its hinges. I feel my body yanked, but my fright ripples through my nerves into the air, kinetickry snapping and releasing.

‘Cease, Taye!’

Niobe’s stubbornness is too much. He throws his arms up. Energy pools through the air, collects in front of him and rips towards her. She doesn’t flinch. The air around her simply shifts and warps. Kinetic waves from her and us collide. Energy snaps bright, redirects sideways. Glass explodes, wood smacks, paper streams around us, ground croaks. I’m floating a full metre in the air. And dust is spinning around me. The whirl drops, then I do too, collapsing onto the floor.

Taye and his mother are standing at either side of the office. The tension is literally vibrating through the air. I smell smoke nearby. The curtains of the now empty window are

whipping and snapping. Behind the doorway shorn of its door, staff and guards don't look surprised. I guess this kind of conflict is normal for Kinetics. Especially in this family. Niobe, scrubbered unsenseable as always, stands serenely against the denouement of violence around her. The fingers of one hand are resting lightly on the desk.

Next to her are Pierre and a man whose ánimo I recognise at once. It glints into a reflective resonance of anger and curiosity: Buscador, Sabrador's aide, who only hours ago warned me about getting too involved with this family. What is he doing here?

My focus shifts back to Niobe, whom Taye compels me to loathe behind the love. She's wearing a vibrant magenta suit, the hue of the Progressive's campaign. Taye's still shirtless, I notice. The necklace has been ripped apart, but diamonds are circling his neck freely, as if following an invisible chain. He'd look regal if his eyes weren't so red.

Everything's quiet, except for the distant sounds of popping and rumbling.

Finally, Niobe speaks, slowly and softly, to the aides behind us, 'Dict headquarters we'll arrive at the rally a bit late. Maybe get Keens to dict longer. And viz what those sounds were. The last bit we need is disruption to voting tomorrow.'

Pierre turns to Buscador. 'I cogged that telepotential bridges were rare?' he asks.

'They are. I haven't seen a telepotential bridge in years. It takes ferocious Sensorial Potency,' Buscador replies. 'Vidente is more powerful than he realises.'

'Max more, gleamly,' says Niobe. 'Miguel, Potentiary Buscador will read the result of your sensorigraph. You've done bono.' She's eyeing my neck. It seems lumps of diamond are circling my throat too. As soon as I notice it, they freeze in place. Objects are responding to my thoughts as if I were Kinetic myself. 'How long does a telepotential bridge last?'

'Only minutes, usually, depending on the depth of the conexión between the Sensorial and the anchor,' Buscador replies. 'You should know it can be bidirectional.'

Taye already knows it's bidirectional. He's feeling my sentience. For a second, he relishes the comfort of sensing my ánimo in his own body. It's fuzzy for him and new, but he can tell I'm there.

Niobe is fascinated, which irks us even more. She knows exactly what I've found out and she should face it, not ogle at the magiary I can channel at the moment.

'Maman?' Taye says in a low voice. The tiniest crack breaks an otherwise steady tone. 'Stop this.'

'Stop what?' she sings.

'Pretending everybit's calm. That you're just interested in some befucked bridge!'

‘You literally barged your way in here, mon fils. I assume you’re upset.’ She smiles slowly. We want to kinetick her head off. She drifts into her chair like a principal about to scold naughty children. When Taye doesn’t say anything, she sighs, ‘I need to be at Ocean Point by ten, Taye. It’s the closing rally of the campaign. You should be there too. The press loves the family image.’ He opens his mouth, but all that comes out is a choke. She grunts. ‘If you can’t—’

‘You wit what you did!’ I spit.

Everyone turns to me. Niobe’s face could kill me with a stare alone.

I blurt out, ‘I mean, Your Magnificence. Sorry.’ But the damage is done.

‘Gleamly,’ says Niobe, ‘accent is also transferred across a telepotential bridge. And terms of endearment too. Your mother and I once tried to form a bridge, Miguel. Did you wit that?’

Taye reaches for me and grips my hand. His flesh is hot, sweaty. Our ánimos chime through the contact.

Niobe sees this. Her expression is twisted. ‘Taye must dict for himself,’ Niobe says. The shattered glass rustles across the floor into a momentary tornado.

‘If I could dict for myself, I would have facked it years ago, wouldn’t I?’ splutters Taye.

‘Stop holding hands – it’s infantile,’ Pierre grumbles.

Taye is crumbling and rearing simultaneously. But he releases my hand. Buscador leans towards Niobe and says, ‘I can interpret his thoughts for you.’

‘No, he must learn to dict up,’ says Niobe.

‘Do you already know what the sensorigraph revealed?’ I ask.

A deep, heavy thwack echoes between the skyscrapers. ‘What was that?’ Niobe calls to the aides.

Daniel appears at the doorway. ‘Barotic sonic pulse, Your Magnificence,’ he says. ‘Barotics are pushing at the Guard. They’re trying to blast through security. It’s holding, for now.’

‘How max is it?’

‘About a thousand, Lowburb and Barotic combined, from what we can viz.’

‘There won’t be Sensorials in that mob,’ says Buscador.

‘Don’t be so sure,’ says Niobe. ‘This is counterprogramming from the Preservists. They’re trying to distract attention from our rally by riling up my old synod.’

‘Maman!’ shouts Taye, blasting the dust in the room into a swirl. ‘Leave fucking politics alone for one minute, please!’

For once, Niobe shows irritation. It contorts her face. ‘Not now, Taye. Your gripes can wait. I need to glimmer this up.’

‘Maman,’ he repeats, his voice tumbling into sobs. Her eyes flicker between his. ‘This whole time you wist what I did there. And then you arranged for it to be – I don’t even wit what you facked.’

She steels, but her eyes are glistening. Her necklace trembles as if it wants to break apart. The Kinetics are frozen by the bluntness of the emotions that pour from Taye now in breathy convulsions. Pierre turns away with a guttural sound. Niobe looks like she wants to hug her son and shun him at once. ‘What else did you expect me to do?’ she asks intensely.

Taye’s chest heaves in and out. She leans back in her chair, flicking a nail against the edge of the desk.

Pierre swears suddenly, almost ridiculously, and strides back until he’s between his wife and son. It’s a failingly paternal move. ‘What did you expect from this min clash up, Taye?’

‘I don’t wit, Papa!’ Taye cries. Tears and snot are mingling on his cheeks. ‘Maybe I cogged ye would dict somebit for a change.’

‘We dict max—’

‘We dict around but we never veritly *say* anybit real!’ Taye spits. ‘It’s all glimmer and show, the max befucked time! Everybit is calculated, transactional. Alwise around the truth, never at it.’ He looks over Pierre’s shoulders to his mother, who is regal but her face is close to breaking, spasming against itself. Taye speaks slowly, in a wet breath. ‘You wist what I did. You *wist*, Maman. You made me juxt them. And when it … when it … I cogged I was alone. The others there, they didn’t care as long as they got their stipend from the Pyrrhics and the Luminents or whoever the fuck was huffing up that smuggling. But you wist what I did in that room and when I came home you wist I was a mess. You could have at least dicted somebit, asked somebit, I don’t wit, been a mother. My magiary was the one that kineticked that bullet back. I cog it was. I never could find out because it all happened so sliply.’ His ánimo calls for me. ‘What did you do? How did you huff everybit up? Did you order that … father … to be … you …’ He’s hyperventilating. ‘You …’

The floorboards are creaking. Pierre is staring at Taye with pity blurring into disgust. Buscador is stunned by the ánimos in the room. I’m so thrust in the flow of Taye’s griefs that I can only watch and feel. Once again, Taye’s hand has found my arm. Niobe sees it and moves from it.

I feel for Taye to calm enough to speak again. He shifts towards the sense, slows his breathing and tries again. ‘Was the boy even dead?’

Niobe raps her fingers against the wood. Her voice is mostly steady when she replies, ‘What else did you expect me to do?’

‘Was he dead?’ Taye bellows. ‘And the father? That man was alive when I left that room! Did you huff that up too? Huh?’

She presses her lips together. For the first time, a tear breaks down her cheek. It’s so slight that it seems a trick of the light, but it’s a break in her that enflames Taye’s fury. She rises, walks to him, slowly, but stops just short of close. Pierre steps back, whether out of deference or a desire to escape, I can’t tell. Niobe speaks in a low voice. ‘I did what I needed to do to protect you aft the mistakes that were made. And I did what I needed to do to protect the Society from a breach.’

‘A breach would have set Glouw up to be toppled, verit? I would have cogged you’d want that,’ Taye says so menacingly Niobe takes a step back.

‘A breach would have imperilled every Potent alive, including you, mon fils.’

Taye scowls. He looks at Pierre again in a vain plea for sanity. Then he asks in an almost inaudible murmur, ‘What did you do to that Impotent father?’

‘I would have cogged you’d be grateful,’ she says.

‘Then you don’t ken me, Maman.’

‘Taye, don’t dict to your mother like th—’ says Pierre.

‘Don’t glimmer up to protect her, mon père. Were you even aware of any of this? Or you were being her dumb prop as usual?’

Pierre’s ánimo surges so heavily that I step in front of Taye myself, inserting my body into the proxemics. Pierre raises his hand to me, but Taye snaps, ‘No, you don’t get to be angry now! Where were you fore?’ Pierre gives his son a face of fury, then looks to his wife, who just shakes her head slightly. He growls pathetically and thrusts his hand towards Niobe’s desk. It tips up, but not enough to fall over. The wood simply clatters back in anticlimactic derision. Taye actually laughs at his father’s weak kinetickry. It’s belaboured, but it’s enough to send Pierre storming out with heavy footsteps and a steaming ánimo.

Niobe reaches her hand to Taye, the son who inherited her extraordinary magiary, and cups his cheek in her palm. He recoils, but she grips until he winces. ‘You misunderstand love,’ she says with a fierce, throaty voice that is seconds away from collapsing.

‘You killed an innocent human being,’ Taye breathes. ‘And you preach tolerance. At least I followed in your footsteps, became a murderer just like you. At least my murder was – was defensive. Yours was mere politics.’

He’s said it. The words ejected from him in a torrent, escaping almost against his will, but they’ve been uttered now. Without a feelingstream, all I see from Niobe is the shadow and cold in her eyes.

Her voice evens out until it’s barely expressive, choked of the maternal. ‘I made arrangements to prevent the exposure of Potents to Impotentkind. If I ever become Grand Master, I will have to do the same many times again. And you should cog carefully what defensiveness means to a people like ours.’

‘And I imagine the Pyrrhics aren’t the only ones doing business with Impotents on the ground, verit? Interactions aren’t breaches of the Charter to you, as long as Alti fack them? You dicted me to juxt them so I wist the costs of power, so I became like you. Verit, Maman?’

She releases her hold. The bond between them, as imperilled as it probably has been for years, has crossed into something neither can grasp now. Taye’s ánimo is settling into the chasm.

Niobe adjusts her suit. She’s done talking. ‘Daniel, obb the flycar around. After the rally, I’m voying to that protest. Let’s viz if we can channel some of that resentment. I will not have the Barotics causing chaos. Buscador, get the sensorigraph before you leave. And brief Sabrador.’

She’s already at the door when Taye says, almost to the air, ‘They look like you, you wit.’ She pretends to be focused on something on Daniel’s crystalpod. ‘The people there, the Impotents. Most of them look like you, like me. We could easily be their kin. You’re supposed to be the one Kinetic leader who undercogs what that means.’

‘Huff up a flycar home for Miguel. If my son wants one too, you might as well oblige. Pierre will do for the rally.’ She disappears without another look back.

Her absence shifts the sentido into bleak anti-resolution.

Buscador, whose ánimo is vibrant with surprise, moves slowly through the silence and holds out both hands to me. ‘Before you do that, can I ask you something?’ I say. ‘Why would Sabrador send you to sense this sensorigraph from me? What interest does it serve? Velox already knew what happened in Johannesburg. There was no intelligence, just incrimination. You could have done it yourself.’

I feel Taye's focus when Buscador replies, 'She insisted you did it. She likes intelligence to be controlled and verified and safely stored. And like I said to you earlier, this is high politics. Our synod has an interest in the Society's anonymity in the Impotentate.'

'Or we have an interest in getting compromising detail on Kinetic and Pyrrhic complicity in breaking the Societal Charter. Or maybe we're alright with it.'

'You're thinking too hard about this.'

I take his hands and let him sense what he wants. He nods to me, then to Taye, and leaves with a quiet that makes the clamour of what's happened hang in the air.

Taye wipes his face with the back of his hand, but all it does is smear the tears and snot around. 'Never wist I'd also leave this family one day.'

'Also?'

For the first time, I sense the swirl of old feelings around Kehinde. I wonder if he senses that I've met his brother and that I understood exactly what Taye meant. He just says, 'There's more to this family, if you can cred it, fra.'

He wanted catharsis, but all he managed was angry words and walls. But something has shifted. A scab has been picked and he tries to revel in what has surfaced, thin though it has been. I can't shake the feeling of waste.

Chapter 18

At the flywalk outside, Taye watches from a distance as Niobe and Pierre step into their flycar. His ánimo is stiffening against the gush he exposed. He huffs to himself and turns to the skyline. The Needle is visible from here. Its slender upper floors peep out above the administrative buildings, piercing the sky with its single gold beam of pure magium. ‘You wit the point of that beam?’ he asks, nodding towards it. His voice is still hollow.

The trivial point feels almost sacrilegious. ‘To guide escapeliners to the Magial Isle during the Great Retreat,’ I reply. He’s shivering, still shirtless, against the air up here. I make to take my own jacket off for him, but it just slips off me, flips in the air and settles on his shoulders. The telepotential bridge is still live.

He starts. ‘You’re getting firm at using my magiary.’ He smiles at that, then grimaces. ‘You wit what her plan is? My mother’s? She wits the Progs won’t get a majority on the Subcouncil tomorrow. She’s popular, obbed some Upperburbers into the caucus, but there’s no way she’ll win outright. But as long as the Preservists lose seats, she’ll make a play.’

‘A play for what?’

‘Grand Master.’ He laughs at the simplicity of it all. ‘Everybit is in service of getting the Hallowed Throne. Everybit. I’ve always wist she wanted it. You were wondering why Buscador was here tonight, verit?’

‘For the sensorigraph.’

The talk of politics is animating him, despite the drying tears and puffy eyes. ‘Partly, yes. But mostly she’s been courting your master. She’s a vote away from toppling Glouw on the Grand Council. Six synods are braced up to support her. Sensorials will be the tipping vote. And she wanted the evidence of what happened because I wouldn’t dict her. She was shoring up the information space.’

His flycar is summoned to the air before us. ‘You think of politics like I think of the law. How I used to think of it anyway. Keeps your mind occupied when everything else is too much.’

He breathes deeply for a moment, shaking his shoulders as if to shake from the night. ‘Let me obb you home. Again.’

The sentido común of the Midburbs washes through me as we descend. Despite the very early hour, the neighbourhood feels awake and on edge. Taye notices me rubbing my arms reflexively, but doesn't say anything. He keeps looking behind, expecting to see Kinetic security around each corner.

He's sitting right next to me. There's a ring of seats he could have chosen, but he went straight for this one. He even inches towards me. The boundary between our ánimos is smudged, but it pulls together then clarifies into two parts again like dough being stretched and kneaded. His soul has lodged so compellingly in my flesh and heart, and tugs at my thoughts so much, that I feel I might tumble into him. Not for the first time, something in me blanches at the depth of my surrender. The plummet feels ceaseless. What use would braking have?

We sit in silence as we move towards the Sensorial barrios. The flywalks aren't as well lit down here as they are in Loftry, so small parks and closed kiosks appear randomly under neon lightballs against the City's nighttime cloak. People are still meandering around in couples and trios. Even the aqueducts and floating pondworks of the Aquial district are dull masses of black. The puffs of flowers that characterise the Barrio Secondario are beyond sight too, making the area that usually is so vibrant with life seem so staid. Maybe I'm just seeing the City with new eyes, a vision coloured by Velox ego and Upperburb indifference.

Taye's thinking about how weird it is to feel so comfortable in someone's presence. He senses that I sense that across the telepotential bridge, pulls back in shame, then leans towards it again. When he sniffs, it's wet and groggy. 'How long will this befucked bridge bit last?' he asks, not without some regret.

'I have no idea,' I reply. 'I've never been in one. Only heard of them. I don't even understand why we've bridged.'

'It's too max.' The flycar has reached my apartment block, but he doesn't move. 'Nil sister and friend to greet you this time.'

'Presenciada, remember.'

He nods absently. Somehow, the mundane act of getting out of a flycar seems silly compared to the madness of the day. Before I can make to leave, Taye grips my arm tightly. 'This doesn't feel like friendship,' he says. 'Not Kinetic friendship. It's …' He closes his eyes against the feelingstreams swirling towards something unreachable in his world. 'Give me the word.' With everything this night has revealed, all the psychic depths he's toiled through, *this* is his concern? Is it distraction or intention that makes him ask?

‘Plenipotentiary Sabrador says it’s between ansia and consumidad, heading towards almanistad.’

‘Those are three words. Ye make it so exterious.’ His thumb moves up and down my arm under his loosening grip. He notices this and seems enthralled by it. ‘Which one do you cog it is?’

He’s intoxicating right now. I’m stripped bare. I’ve seen too much, sensed through too much. His sensing across the bridge is halting and inexperienced, but he’s seeing me. I almost laugh at the hilarity of it, that I told him off all those nights ago at Club Pique for resisting being seen and known and reached out to, but I’m weary of it myself. This bridge won’t last, surely. What would I be in its absence?

He’s looking at me intensely. ‘It’s exterious. I can almost feel where your mind went. I cog I do. It’s hard to wit,’ he says.

‘Welcome to my magiary,’ I say. ‘Almanistad. It means something like soulmates.’

He pulls away. ‘Not like that.’

‘Physical desire is a spectrum for Sensorials, Taye. Almanistad isn’t always sexual.’

He hovers around shame and wonder for a while. Through the window, I see Señora Recibiz walking into the building with a trail of people. Her seerscope tonight will be a commodity. ‘Do you? Desire me that way?’ he asks.

He’s struck the question I haven’t wanted to interrogate. ‘Honestly? I desire a lot from you. Not that, I don’t think.’ He’s watching his thumbs twirling around each other on his clasped fists. ‘Physical desire for me makes me seek sacia usually. Historically. I’ve never really needed deeper conexiones beyond the women in my family. And Isabel. I’ve seldom needed more emotive conexiones.’

‘And this is deep.’ He still isn’t looking at me. He’s picking at fluff on the seat next to him now.

‘If you’re worried, you don’t have to be,’ I say. ‘Believe me, I know what non-Sensorial men worry about with me. I sense their panic all the time. Your synod makes you think about love and desire and companionship and sex in ways that are foreign to me. I don’t expect you to understand.’

Suddenly, he leans over to me, reaches his arms towards me and pulls me to him, clutching me into a desperate embrace. I sense the shame cutting at the edges of his ánimo, but he’s familiar with the feeling by now. So, he clasps me, holding me, being held, squeezing through

unfamiliar tones of connection, both the electric in the physical and the graspless in the intersecting feelingstreams.

When I get into the apartment, Leonor is in the living room watching the Progressive rally and twiddling her new SIB brooch. It has an extra slash through the eye indicating her higher rank. When she sees me, her eyes unfocus. I'm not sure which part of this day, this insane day, will appear first to her Cogniscient probing. 'You know, in the other synods, siblings ask each other questions about their day,' I say, collapsing onto the sofa next to her.

She doesn't rise to the humour. The glow of the crystalslab screen is casting her face in pink. It's a colour I've seen too much of today and it represents something horrid now. She gestures the volume off. 'She's good,' she says, nodding to the hologram. Niobe is gesticulating at a pulpit. There's no trace of the convulsions in her home office not even an hour ago. 'Recibiz's final seerscope of her predicted election results came out. Barrios Secondario and Tercero will stay Independent. Primero will go Preservist. Quarto will reelect Sabrador, of course. So not a peep of Progressive representation for the Sensorials.'

'Sabrador might surprise you.'

She sifts near my thoughts for a moment. 'Mamá has fucked us over.'

I watch Niobe kissing Pierre on stage. The crowd loves it. Would they love it if they knew how tepid their marriage seems up close? 'I don't think any of us has a choice, Leonor. When have we ever? We just try to make things work with the thoughts and feelings that get dumped on us and the narrow options the Society gives us.' I point to the screen. 'It's always been that way, right?'

'From the signing of the Charter,' Leonor replies. 'Thank you.'

'For what?'

'For understanding why I stayed at the SIB. After I saw what they do there. Part of what they do anyway. Mamá will need time.' The newscast has switched to a crowd of what looks like Barotics, judging by the tornadoes ripping through the air. It must be the protest Niobe was monitoring. They're at the entrance to the Needle at ground level. The chyron blinks: LOWBURB PROTEST GROWS, GUARD CONTINGENT INCREASED. 'They're protesting Glouw's decision to move the Isle.'

'Why now? We've been moving for weeks.'

'Hanging around Taye Velox has kept you away from the news.' She manages a smirk. 'I think they're protesting to get leverage in the vote tomorrow. They can get Niobe Velox to play

for their votes. I'm sure the Barotics would love their old synodic subject to support the synod's cause. They really don't trust her, you know. She betrayed them when she rose. Do we want to remove ourselves from the Velox orbit?' she asks. 'Would you even be able to at this point?'

I sigh and yawn. I'm exhausted. 'Like I said, we don't have a choice.'

'You can't choose that he's a consumigo for you. But you can choose to let him become more, to become an almano. You can't be almanos without a lot of intention.'

'I know the theory, Leonor.'

I notice a used scapesage joint next an empty glass on the side table. 'You know the theory, but you've never experienced anything close to it. Neither of us has. Your pensario has changed since you started bonding him. I see his pensario in yours, more and more. Right now, it's diffuse. You know you aren't supposed to lose your identity in a conexión.'

'You've had no emotive conexiones outside the family. How would you know?'

She swipes the newscast off. 'How was the sensorigraph?' she asks.

'Bleak,' I say, knowing she may have mined most of the details by now, especially if they're embedded in my subconscious, where her magiary tends to be so accurate in its reading. 'That family is insane.'

She nods, either at what I'm saying or her reading. 'I'm worried about you,' she says.

'I'm worried about you too. We've both been caught in the Velox web.'

'But you're the one whose pensario is disappearing. Do you even know what you want from him?' she asks.

'The conexión was triggered with an unusual event, under scapesage. What I want from him is difficult to work out when I sensed too much of him. How do I find what I want in that torrent?'

'This is why I avoid deep emotive conexiones outside the family,' she says seriously. 'You used to avoid them too. I know there's Isabel, but you've usually kept her in presencia when she's begged for intimañía. We keep the saciados and lascivanos on the side to keep us alive, maybe venture into the occasional ansia, but our hearts don't venture outside much. We learned well from Mamá. We take after her. We probably read and sensed that trait in her in our childhoods and just started living it.'

We're both wondering if Mamá's connection, her conexión, with Niobe decades ago might not be part of the reason.

Chapter 19

Election days get Isabel going. They grease her activism and enliven her soul. But today she isn't feeling the energy. When Mamá, Leonor and I find her at the Centro Comunitario, she's lying virtually horizontal on the pew, clutching her cargitas and staring at the dusty ceiling as if misery were hiding in the beams.

'Isabel, niñera!' calls Mamá. We squeeze past families and familiarities in the aisle to get to the Amizantes. Mamá greets Lucio, Mariana and Valora with hugs (and lingers noticeably with Valora, which Leonor and I both notice and share a look over) while I ask Isabel why she isn't following Bienoyente in last-minute campaigning. She gestures vaguely to the front pews. I can see Bienoyente in her pink regalia, nodding vigorously with a group of elderly folk. 'Mariana, you know I look out for her,' Mamá is saying to one of Leonor's mothers. They're both powerful Cogniscients, so Magon knows why they bother talking. 'I'll see what I can do. Maybe she'll open up to her padralta.'

'She has three parents,' Mariana says, shaking her head. 'You'd think she has enough!'

'Recibiz is milking it,' Leonor says to Isabel and me. The old woman is the centre of attention. She's pointing animatedly at her crystalpod and taking photos with fans. 'I heard her magiary is basically as weak as Tía Venezia's, which is saying something.'

Santiago Sapiente, the incumbent Subcouncillor, has entered with a veritable entourage in tow. He's holding hands with his two calorimanas, one long-term and the other apparently new, making sure the cameras see the show of good, diverse Sensorial family patterning. Most people have arrived with big mugs of inhibidor to brace against such a huge crowd – a whole barrio. My family took enough this morning to knock out a horse.

'Isabel, you usually love the Congregación,' I say.

Her ánimo is brooding. 'Did your Mamá tell you what happened to me yesterday in that brewery in the Lowburbs? Seeing as you didn't ask?' she says and clicks her tongue. Leonor sends a feeling close to vindicative warning. 'I thought I'd chat to some locals about the election, right? Get a feel for things. Firstly, they didn't like my accent.' Leonor snorts. 'Then apparently I assumed wrong when I thought the Progressives were more popular down there.'

'Isabel, the caucus is run by a Kinetic,' says Leonor. 'They're elites pretending to care. What did you expect?'

Isabel shakes her head. ‘Of course a coloniser would think that.’ Leonor rolls her eyes. ‘I thought at least they wouldn’t want the Preservists still in charge. All that violent security down there, the synodic bias in jobs and housing and healthcare.’

‘This is why I never go down there,’ says Leonor to Isabel’s glower. ‘We’re just as bad as Upperburbers to them.’

I’m surprised Isabel has never considered this. She’d heard Leonor’s disclosure about the SIB. Was that too abstract? ‘Did the colonisers offer you more money for your promotion? Or is the quid quo pro more implied?’

‘Can you two please not?’ I ask. ‘This crowd is bad enough to handle.’ The hall is overflowing now. People are standing in aisles and crammed in the mezzanine. I notice Recibiz has found a seat in the front row. Her children are being catered to by her very stressed vivama. It can’t escape anyone’s notice that she’s positioning herself. ‘Do you think Señora Recibiz fancies herself on the Secta de Oráculos?’

‘She’s practically buying her way in, Miguel,’ says Mamá from across Isabel, just as the Congregación rises. The ecstatic Sensorials, always near the front, applaud the Sectas vigorously. I notice most of us in the back are more perfunctory. The elders are aged beyond credibility. A few are floated in on flycarts. We have to wait for a bunch to totter down the aisle, their yellow robes so vivid they make their ancient skin look sickly.

‘For the love of the Magon, can we find a more democratic way of doing this?’ mutters Leonor. Isabel has the grace to agree.

It’s a palaver getting twenty elders onto a stage that, for some reason, still has steep stairs. Flasks of inhibidor are glinting under the yellowing lightballs above. There’s something obscene in how drugged up we have to be to get through a ceremony so central to our culture. Mamá gives me a sideways look when my crystalpod vibrates.

You don’t have to vote for us

I type back:

Sensorials don’t vote. Our will is divined

And my ánimo hardly makes a difference

And do you still want the Progs to win? After everything your mother said to you last night? Seriously???

The Convocante is stumbling through deep Spanish. The Congregación is fidgeting in incomprehension and indifference. ‘Why does anyone pretend this is our language? Honestly,’ whispers Leonor. Her banter makes this feel more familiar.

‘Ahora,’ the Convocante calls, ‘registramos la voluntad del Barrio Tercero, dada por medio de los comunes, en las elecciones para el Subconsejo de la Sociedad de Potentes. Y ahora mismo, les invitamos a la Secta de Sabios Sensoriales a sentir el sentido común, y a la Secta de Sabios Cogniscientes a leer el pensado común.’ She’s intoning with priestly excess. ‘Sabios, por favor. Can I invite the representative of the Societal Electoral Commission to observe?’

A few people have to run up the stage to help the elders move into their two circles. A few look thoroughly confused, which doesn’t say much for how accurate the election divination needs to be. ‘Mamá, please get on the Secta de Cogniscientes one day,’ says Leonor. ‘Get some lucidity in that group.’ She groans while a particularly immobile sabio has his hands manually manipulated to hold onto the arms of the sabios on either side of him.

The Convocante clears her throat. ‘Empesi— I mean empezad!’ There are some giggles at the slip, but most have started to sway and fidget on their feet.

‘Is this woman for real?’ says Leonor. A throuple in front of us shushes her.

‘Remember back in the day when the divinación was read in a nexo? Everyone in this whole room, altogether?’ whispers Mariana. Mamá nods morosely.

I wonder if thinking loudly that I don’t know who I’d vote for will make any difference. Unlikely.

We wait in cough- and shuffle-inflected silence so long that the electoral observer nudges the Convocante in confusion. She shakes her head at first, but eventually she taps a sabia on the shoulder. The quiet makes my thoughts wander in the direction of Taye and the befucked sensorigraph.

‘We could literally just vote,’ says Leonor, pulling my attention mercifully back to the present, as tedious as it is. The throuple again gives her a nasty look, but she returns it with a flex of her SIB brooch. That makes them turn back quickly.

The geriatric circles finally break. The Convocante doesn’t hide her relief. She has the senior elders of each Secta approach her and makes a gauche show of watching them write on a crystalpod. At last, the sentido común in the Congregación piques with nerves and anticipation. I’m grateful for the fuzz the inhibidor gives the feelingstream. ‘¡Las sectas son unánimes! La voluntad del barrio se ha adivinado. Es la voluntad del sentido común y el pensado común que se elija como Subconsejero del Barrio Tercero al señor Santiago Sapiente, candidato de los Sensoriales Independientes.’

Sapiente does his best to look surprised, and perhaps such a heavily desensitised hall is the one time he can get away with such falseness in front of Sensorials. He drags his calorimanas on

stage with him and shakes the Convocante's hand with strained magnanimity. The cheers and whoops in the Congregación certainly suggest the result is correct, but Magon knows the electoral method is spurious. My crystalpod pings almost too quickly:

Bienoyente was a bonoform candidate. Max shame

Seeing his name makes my nerves tighten and fire. I ignore the ping, even if ignoring the befucked drama around those feelings isn't possible.

The Congregación has decided they can sit now, not that we've been invited to do so. Sapiente finally releases his calorimanas' hands (I note they look strangely relieved for calorimanas) and bellows, 'Queridos Sensoriales of the Barrio Tercero, I thank you, humbly, for the honour of serving you again in the Subcouncil.' His tone rises as if expecting adulation, but the response is lukewarm. 'Our Synod's electoral process is unique, impartial and uninfluenced. And we do enjoy being elected before the other synods even finish voting.' Some in the audience laugh politely. 'We'll only know tonight what shape the Subcouncil will take once the other synods' votes are counted, but I assure you, regardless of the outcome, that I will hold the governing caucus to account. The Grand Master's reckless action to migrate the Magial Isle will cause real pain for Sensorial families and familiarities. I will work with other Sensorial Independents and likeminded subcouncillors to get answers from the Grand Mastery. As always, my first duty is to protect our Sensorial way of life from those who would do us harm' – he finally gets a hearty cheer – 'and from the forces of faux solidarity who would have us erase our identity in favour of eternal servitude to Upperburb hegemony!'

The Amizantes insist on us joining them for cena. It beats the printed food we'd have thrown together, but it does mean adhering to more Election Day tradition than the Videntes generally tolerate. Their apartment overlooks a courtyard where some Barrio teens have gathered for a probably unwise game of Interrogación Rota. Their jeers reach through the kitchen window while Luis vocalises his cooking to no one in particular. Mamá and Valora are smoking scapesage in the corner of the living room, their bodies weaving towards each other loosely and their ánimos crackling in sacia. Leonor is only a couch away from them. She's watching news coverage of polling, but keeps glaring at the conexión. If she's sending Mamá mental disapproval, she doesn't show any signs.

Isabel must sense the tension. 'That's been coming for a while, don't you think?' she asks me. She puts a bowl of sage crisps on the coffee table. 'My Papá insists. Firesage, for eternal energy, he says.'

‘Your Papá should stop listening to health fads,’ says Leonor. She tastes a crisp tentatively and gives an indifferent sound. ‘Keeping track of my one parent’s conexiones is hard enough. I don’t know how you do it with three.’

‘Lots of verbalising,’ Isabel replies. She swipes up the volume on the living room crystalslab. ‘That protest hasn’t moved.’

She’s right. A reporter down at the ground level of the Needle is trying to get a Barotic to explain why ‘such violence is necessary on Election Day’. The crowd has swelled considerably since last night. From the images the newscast is showing, there are thousands of people there. I remember Niobe asking Taye to monitor one of the Barotic seats. I doubt much voting is going on in the Barotic Quarter.

‘At least they can choose not to vote. Our opinions bleed into the comunes. As long as the Sectas read it right,’ says Leonor, looking again at Mamá and Valora. ‘I think they’re heading for caloristad. Mamá hasn’t wanted a calorimano or calorimana before, right?’

Her disapproval is predictable, but it isn’t shared by anyone else. Luis and Mariana are quite happy for the shift. Mariana even says so at cena, tipping a wineglass to the couple in a warm toast. They hardly have any choice. Their wife’s feelings would have been clear for a while and their conexión seems open enough to allow the shift.

Luis has to chide Isabel a few times for turning to see the newscast in the other room. ‘Polls haven’t even closed for the other synods, mija,’ he says. ‘Our five seats hardly make a difference.’

‘I’m worried that those protesters come from seats the Preservists couldn’t win,’ Isabel sighs, but her attention is still on the screen.

‘Did you really think the Progs had a chance in the Lowburbs?’ asks Valora. ‘I always thought the Progs did better in the Midburbs. Velox is liked by the professional classes who want some inter-synodic blending to occur. Can you imagine Upperburbers voting for her?’ She giggles at her own absurdity.

Mamá finds Valora’s analysis stimulating. ‘You’re right, Valora,’ she says. ‘The Progs’ base is in the Midburbs. The Lowburbers don’t trust them. And why would they? They’re led by a Midburber who became an Upperburber and hasn’t looked back to allow others to join.’

‘Well, the Lowburbers might not vote for anyone if they don’t open those polling stations,’ says Isabel in a low voice.

‘I’m glad Sapiente was reelected,’ says Mariana. The ánimos of two Videntes and Isabel thwack into irritation. Mariana reads them with righteous glee. ‘Isabel, you might like the idea of

Sensorials running around the Upperburbs and bonding with whoever they want. The Progs have an unrealistic view of how Potents operate, how we've always operated, ever since the Charter was signed. We need protection. Sapiente speaks sense. We're always safer when our interests are served as a community. What was that?'

It sounded like a ricocheting pop. Another one clamours through the neighbourhood seconds later. Valora moves to the living room window and cranes out. 'I don't—' A massive snap makes her jump back. A moment later, the ground quivers.

'Shiftquake?' calls Mariana.

Isabel is already back in the living room. She shouts, 'They're trying to storm the Needle!'

We crowd around the refracted screen. The sentido común is startling and grumbling, making me wish I'd taken more inhibidor after this morning. The camera is looking down on a mass of people pressing against the ancient doors of the Needle. Air is undulating in mirages and currents towards the building. 'Why are they trying to get into the Needle?' asks Mariana incredulously.

'Those are Barotics at the head there,' says Isabel. 'This can't just be about those Guard crackdowns a few weeks ago or the Migration, can it?' My crystalpod vibrates. I can't deal with Taye right now.

Mamá is shaking her head. 'No, this is something else. I haven't seen a crowd that big in years. Not since we were at university, Mariana,' she says. 'And why *that* synod? A Midburb synod, down there with the Lowburbers?'

The reporter is breathless. '… that Guard may have opened fire. We cannot confirm …'

'This has been brewing for a long time,' says Mamá with a resuming academic detachment. Valora's hand finds hers. 'Recibiz called it, didn't she? Even if she didn't know precisely what it was she was predicting.'

Luis is rubbing Mariana's shoulders. 'What do you mean it's been brewing?' he asks.

Mamá replies while looking at something on her crystalpod, 'You should talk to Lowburbers sometimes, Luis.'

'But Barotics are Midburbers.'

'Midburbers marginally. You know the history. It's not the Barotics you should be worried about down there.' She walks away with a chilly pique in her ánimo. I don't think anything of it until I hear, almost too faint to make out, her saying into her device, 'Kehinde?'

My ánimo must snap into focus, because Leonor and Isabel both turn to me. Leonor's expression hardens. I tell her mentally to get out of my head and when the room is distracted by images of an explosion, I follow Mamá out the apartment.

She's almost at the stairwell when I catch up to her. 'Yes. Yes, of course, Kehinde,' she says, seeing me and gesturing me closer. 'I'll – yes, alright.' She pockets the device. 'You better come along.'

'What's happening, Mamá?'

'Kehinde is here,' she replies, already going down the stairs. My crystalpod vibrates three times. I only see 'need you' from Taye on the screen before I switch the thing off.

Kehinde Velox – if he even uses the surname anymore – is leaning against the wall next to our apartment door. There's a bruise under his right eye and a gash above his lip. His clothes are sooty. I'm still unfamiliar with his ánimo, but it's definitely on edge and his eyes are alive, weary and calculating. When he sees my shock at his appearance, he smiles sardonically. 'Brumma,' he says, tipping his head to me. Mamá takes the sight more calmly, but her ánimo is fizzling. 'I didn't wit where else to voy up.' I haven't seen him melt into such vulnerability yet.

'Not out here,' she responds. 'Come in.'

He waits for me to enter first. The gesture feels craven for some reason. I notice he finds the living room without being directed to it. Mamá reads the conclusion I've drawn from this. She shakes her head to stop me from pursuing it.

Kehinde is sitting with the back of his head cradled by both dusty hands. His nerves have jolted my heart rate up. He glances at me, wondering if I'm sensing through him. Unlike Taye, he relishes it, even if for a moment. Mamá has found a box of scapesage joints, which she holds out to him. 'This is the best I can do,' she says. He takes a cigar quickly and moves his hand backwards and forwards over the wrapping, performing some unseen botanickry. Mamá lights it for him and offers me one too, which I decline with a raised eyebrow.

'Do you want me to read what happened?' she asks Kehinde, sitting next to him. The familiarity between them is striking again. It's clearly not just an enseñaristad. Mamá must have a penchant for creating padralterías. I wonder what drives her to it and why this one is so hidden.

Kehinde shakes his head. His hands are shaking. 'They were arresting virs,' he says. 'At the frontline down – down there.' He points at the window.

'By the Needle? You were at that protest?' I ask.

An eyebrow curves in that acerbic way of his. ‘Gleamly. Why wouldn’t I be there? The Lowburbs are rising.’

Mamá asks, ‘They were arresting people – and?’

‘I doshed up that if they arrested me, they’d dict my … *mother.*’ His face twists with venom. ‘I can’t even stand juxt my own people.’ Mamá looks at me darkly. ‘The Guard started arresting the Lowburber end of the crowd. They’re being gentler with the Barotics, gleamly. I had to voy off. Left the protest. Couldn’t voy to my flat because it was max crowded over there. Guard swarming everywise.’ His voice steels. ‘And viz me now, seeking safety in the Midburbs while they fight.’ Loneliness aches through him, but what’s breaking him is the alienation – from everything in his old life and the incompatibility of the new one. Yesterday he had seemed so much more rooted in the Lowburbs. ‘It was stupid. I shouldn’t have obbed up here.’

‘You can stay here tonight, of course,’ Mamá says, rubbing his arm. ‘Getting arrested won’t help anyone. Just know that my daughter will be here too.’

‘The spy?

Mamá scratches her nose. ‘You can trust her.’

‘Can he?’ I ask.

‘How much has she worked out about him?’ she asks.

‘I think she has a general idea. She’ll read the afterburn of his pensario in here.’

‘Mijo,’ Mamá says in a tone eerily echoing Kehinde’s, ‘he’s been here before. She’s read nothing. I know how to hide things from her. Doesn’t she have a lascivano at the moment? Can’t we send her to him?’ She’s already typing on her crystalpod.

Kehinde breathes pink tendrils from the joint. ‘I’ll go, Proffa. It’s drifty,’ he says.

‘No,’ says Mamá firmly. ‘I can get rid of my daughter. All she needs is a push.’ She goes to the kitchen with her crystalpod at her ear.

I find myself staring at Kehinde. His mannerisms have Taye’s substrate. They’re gloomier and more resigned, but his ánimo has a fiercer edge to it. He must hate it when people compare them – if there are many who know, that is. He sees me watching and exhales. ‘Your mother saved me, you wit,’ he says. ‘She’s a firm sor. Undercogs what it’s like not fitting in anywhere.’

‘I’m beginning to realise she has more niñeros than blood children.’

‘She’d be firm for Taye too.’ The comment is so elliptical I try to parse it for a long time. Mamá’s voice is snapping from the kitchen. She and Leonor are in the flow of a fight. Kehinde adds, ‘You feel intensely for him.’

I'm frozen. Not by the question, nor the surprise of it, but by the invitation to remember the feelingstream. Johannesburg. Taye's guilt. Niobe's grotesque protection. 'You read people well,' I say.

'How I survived. Until I ran away from a fight.'

Mamá is back, and perturbed. 'Leonor is going to the SIB. Apparently they called the officers in to deal with what's going on at the Needle.' My mother's morality is as entangled as her daughter's, which probably describes the friction between them better than anything else. 'I don't think you should spend time in her room. She will *definitely* read that. Rather stay out here.' Kehinde's ánimo sparks a suggestion I don't know how to interpret. She fusses over him more than she would with me. Or at least that's the primal response I find myself having.

'You called me her niñero, verit?' he asks me when she's left to find more bedding, which is hilarious given the number of sheets and blankets she's already brought him.

'It means son-figure. That would make her your padralta – mother figure,' I say.

He responds with a last drag of the joint and leans back into the couch, shifting linen around him. 'In the Lowburbs, it's just your people. Doesn't have to be labelled like ye do.' There's a distance between himself and what he's said, even if he feels allied to the Lowburbs. The complexities remind me of Taye again, which makes me want none of this. And yet, I know I can't escape his ánimo's vibration in me. I keep ending up compelled towards dangerous people, or broken people, or both.

Chapter 20

Mamá suggests that I stay with Kehinde. Insists. I protest, but she says she can read that he doesn't need his padralta right now. When I ask what conexión she thinks I might be offering him, she smiles and closes her bedroom door. Not for the first time, I'm trying to assert my agency against people who won't grant it.

Kehinde is watching the news greedily. It's been reduced now to spasms of televised violence and calm. At some point, there's a surge towards the Guard line, but it's restrained quickly and soon the anchors are trying to find Upperburb experts to comment on the crowd's poor tactics and whether the Barotics have hijacked Lowburb grievances. Kehinde swears every time a commentator mourns the disruption to polling. 'What's the point of voting?' he asks the screen. 'It just gives the elites the pretence of legitimacy!' There have been hundreds of arrests and there are reports that Lowburb synods are trying to pull their members back from the frontline to preserve order and open polling stations. Some people have started to camp out on the tarmac. Others are moving upwards into the Midburb storeys, which the anchors are noting with gravity.

'What strand of Botanial magiary do you have?' I ask when the newscast announces that elections in Lowburb and Barotic seats will likely be postponed now.

He's caught off guard by the topic. 'Foliance, mostly. On firm days, my magiary can tap into vinery too.' He regards me for a moment, then, apparently having decided something, adds, 'My magiary is stunted, though.' He moves his hand to a few inches from my face and allows green fibres to sprout from his palm into tendrils. Some leaves start budding and unfurling from the stems, but they quickly brown, then shrink in on themselves. Within seconds, all the greenery that was bursting into life falls in dust and twigs, like magial blight. 'I'm Foliant enough to fack good brews, at least. As long as the sage is treated sliply.'

'Was your magiary always stunted?'

He clenches his jaw. He catches my eyes wandering across his clavicle, just visible above his shirt. I look at the screen and think of Isaac's body, not sure if the sed is projective or a phantom of stress.

'I'll never be able to maintain healthy foliage from scratch,' he says slowly. 'According to the Botanial guides I've dicted to, the damage is permanent. My parents' efforts ensured that.'

He's watching me with his head tilted to the side, his mouth open slightly, his tongue tracing his top teeth. 'Can I ask you somebit personal?' He looks suddenly ravenous.

'You're in a Sensorial barrio,' I reply. 'Candour comes with the territory.'

'Do you already sense what I want to ask?'

'I don't know your ánimo that well.'

He shifts so he's facing me, holding his hands over his knees. The skin on his arms is spare, tight over muscles. It's a rugged physique, unchiselled but fibrous and substantive. 'You're slant, verit? That's the word you use?'

'We absolutely do not use that word.'

'But are you? What word would ye use?'

His ánimo is a flurry. I notice him clutching his knees more tightly. 'We don't gender sexual or physical desire,' I reply. 'There's no point when everyone can read or sense what everyone else wants, at least broadly. And genders in ánimos and pensarios aren't always the same as in bodies. Most Sensorials end up with different gendered mixes in different conexiones. It's more like we have preferences.'

'So, you prefer to, you wit, fuck men?' He's leaning forward and pulling back at the same time, as if his body is propelling him against a tide in his mind.

'I've tended to, yes. I prefer sacia with men.'

'What's sacia?' Something about the question shifts his feelingstream, allowing the slightest vulnerability through his defences. Yet again, I'm compelled towards him, unfamiliar as he is.

I try to decide how much detail he wants and how much he can understand. 'Sacia is a conexión characterised by simple sexual needs. It's about satiety. No other strings. Often sed – thirst, physical attraction – evolves into sacia.'

'So, you've always wist you were only attracted to men?'

'For sex, yes. Maybe for more. Why—'

'Botanials comp chemical pulls and hormones well. Gleamly, the Lowburbs are more progressive than ye Midburbers or Upperburbers want to admit when it comes to coupling. We don't have the same obsessions with bloodlines like the Upperburbers or silly rules like Midburbers. Kinetics can't undercog that virs might want to live juxt and love juxt and fuck each other. Ye Sensorials don't have the monopoly on that.'

His eyes flicker across my torso, then jut further down. It happens quickly, a desperate glint, but I see it and he sees that I see it. For a moment, the air singes.

Kehinde swirls around, wiggling his jaw and easing into a posture that looks calm, but his ánimo aches enough to claw at my stomach. ‘Kehind—’

‘My vir,’ he says softly, not looking at me. ‘Please.’ He cracks his neck from side to side.

‘Do you know how many non-Sensorial men I’ve had this kind of conversation with, sensing exactly what’s going on in their ánimos?’ He’s pretending to watch the news again, resuming the lofty, lethargic vibe he and his brother use so well to present and obscure. ‘I don’t know you, Kehinde, but I know that your feelings aren’t a mistake.’ His eyes are suspicious and hungry, but there’s something gentle there too. ‘Does anyone in your family know?’

‘Your crystalpod has been flashing like exteria,’ he says. I’d put it face-down on the coffee table earlier. He’s right. The glass is glowing.

Taye has pinged about twenty times. Seeing his name on the screen, just inches away from Kehinde, is wrong.

‘It’s him, isn’t it?’ he asks.

Yet again, our eyes meet. He huffs an empty chuckle. His tongue circles his teeth like before.

Even now, another ping appears. ‘Fuck!’ I hiss.

I’m already on my feet, chiming Taye’s frequency, moving as far away from the living room as I can. ‘Pick up! Fuck fuck fuck! TAYE! Taye, don’t—’

‘Fra, I’ve been pinging the max day!’ Taye says. ‘It’s drifty I can voy over, verit? You read my pings. Fra, I need you. I wit it’s been max, I wit. Just, I veritly need you right now. Maman is—’

‘No, you can’t come!’

Kehinde appears next to me. His feelings are trembling into silent grief. He knows exactly who I’m talking to.

‘Oh, I can’t?’ Taye is saying on the other end. The disembodied voice might be loud enough for Kehinde to hear. ‘Fuck, fra, I’m veritly, I’m here. Juxt outwise.’

‘You’re *outside*?’

Kehinde’s gripping the wall. There’s a knock.

‘Fratelle? Miguel? Are you there?’

‘Mijo, what is going on?’ comes Mamá’s voice. ‘The pensado común is screaming!’

Kehinde isn’t moving.

‘It’s drifty, fra,’ Taye says through the crystal, but it’s echoed now behind the front door too. ‘I should have waited for you to dict back. I just – I’ll voy out. I’ll go.’

Kehinde squeezes his eyes shut. Years of anguish are surfacing in the sudden proximity between the twins.

My ánimo reaches for Taye's across the apartment. I will it not to, but the synchrony is automatic, willed by parts of me I can't restrain anymore. He is in crisis. He does need me. He thought he could lean into the neededness.

Mamá has found us. 'I read a certain pensario, mijo,' she says. She actually winces when she sees Kehinde. His thoughtstream must be deafening. 'He's *here*? For the love of the Magon, there are Veloxes everywhere! Kehinde, do you want me to let him in?' He shakes his head violently. 'Alright, alright. You don't have to. I'll get rid of him.'

'No, I should,' I tell her. 'I was on the fucking crystalcall with him.'

Kehinde's body radiates so much confusing angst and pain and agony and fear trust gone too too much I steady myself walk step by step by step focusing on stepping until the door I breathe in as if gulping for air diving through water breathe again …

Taye is dressed in his mother's pink. His feelings are being held down like a lid on a boiling pot. He's pounding one hand in a fist into the other. 'Fra, I'm veritly sorry. I didn't cog this through,' he says.

'It's fine,' I say, feebly. His ánimo and Kehinde's are blending, and the telepotential bridge may be reforming. I can just about sense Taye's mind finding mine again. 'I – my mother's busy in there. The Barrio isn't that interesting, but we can walk. And talk. Verit?' The Hightongue word slipped into my mouth.

He nods quickly, relieved, and rubs his face for a few seconds. 'I didn't wit if that's what you and I do.' He pauses. Squints. Looks at the door I've just shut behind me.

'Taye?' I ask. I pronounce it like his mother, again a slippage.

He shakes his head to wake himself up from some stupor. 'Sorry, I just cogged I sensed somebit. Your magiary's back in me, I cog. It's exterious.'

I point towards the stairwell. 'Do you want to talk about that protest?'

'No,' he says. 'That's not why I'm—' His head whips around.

Kehinde is at the doorway, leaning against the doorpost, triumphant, careless, broken.

Taye blinks. He looks at me for a moment to check if he's still sane. Then he looks back. Takes a step closer. Sobs once, sharply, swallows it. His eyes squint.

Their ánimos are discordant and tight, symphonic and shattering. Taye feels it, I feel him feeling it, all of it, losing himself through the revived telepotential bridge in the aching fury and

distance that Kehinde's feelingstream affords. The intimacy is profound and overwhelming. It's all silent for Magon knows how long. They just stare, one in wonder, the other in snarly longing.

Then Taye finds me, finds my eyes, and sees betrayal for some reason. His ánimo blazes, then shrivels, closing in, shutting down. Realising that he should never have trusted me, or anyone.

I might reach for him, I don't know, but he pushes, kineticks me away so he can run.

'Taye!' I call. 'Taye!' My voice wobbles with my rapid footfalls. The forecourt is crowded, maybe more than usual, but it blurs past. The door tears open at my thought. I have to run to catch up to him. I have to run into his roasting ánimo. The pain slices at me, grips my core, numbing my limbs. 'For Magon's sake, Taye, stop!' I scream.

He's at his flycar. It glistens in the dusk light against his noble form. Quite a few Sensorials are around. I feel them, but Taye's ánimo is too domineering. I'm drawn to its hurt even though I am its source. He sees the spectators and his posture hardens. His eyes are stone.

I move, still breathless, closer to him, but he stops me without even a twitch of muscle. I push forward again, but the kinetickry bounces me backwards. I run at it, yet I'm launched back into the air. My shoulder collides with pavement and I tumble back. 'Fuck it, Taye,' I groan.

A crowd is gathering now. I think I see the glint of a crystalpod. Taye senses the attention. He smiles feverishly in case they're filming, opens the flycar door and steps in, without looking back.

I don't know why but my body surges forward. He blocks me, but I throw kinetickry at the unseen barrier. I know how, somehow. The air buckles and snaps in a gust that rips across the flypath. Taye's surprise and ire only push me further. I clutch the sides of the flycar doorway, panting and drained, my hold on lucidity just about to slip.

Taye pulls himself to the doorway too. Our eyes are inches apart. The closeness is a deluge of pure feelingstream anger and hatred around shrinking familiar fleeing I pull pull pull myself to face him, breathe so I can see him and tell him what he must sense, will sense exactly. 'Taye. Why are you angry with me?'

His necklace is an opaque smear. He seethes at me, his eyes pulsing between mine. 'I cogged you sensed everybit,' he says, tickling his tone.

'Listen,' I say, finding my breath thin somehow. I inhale as fully as I can. 'I know you're surprised I know your brother—'

'You cog this is about you?' he breathes.

‘He …’ Why can’t I think straight? Focus! ‘He knows my mother. They met at the university or something. She’s been – actually I don’t know what they’ve been doing exactly. It’s a fucked up padraltería. I only met him yesterday, I swear.’

He’s keeping too calm. How is he better at handling this than me? ‘Fore or aft the sensorigraph?’ he asks, steadily, gearing towards menace. Metal creaks somewhere. ‘Did you ken him fore or aft the sensorigraph? Were you hiding that you kenned that – that *vir*?’

The answer is in the space between us. I sense him find it across the bridge and flinch back. His ánimo is decaying, retreating. He pulls himself until his nose brushes mine. His breath is slow against my heavy gasps.

I’m trying to find something in him to hold onto – a yearning for contact, a neediness, a sense of care, anything. The feelingstream is noisy and blurring. He’s becoming unreachable. And the block is scoring into me.

His eyes have found something over my shoulder. The toughening in Taye’s brows is enough to know Kehinde is out there.

‘Taye—’

‘Don’t pronounce my name like that,’ he snarls. The poison pleases me for some reason.

The name is repeated, in the way he just rejected, by a voice so similar it sends the world into stereo. ‘Mon frère?’ Kehinde says, close by, very close. ‘Don’t blame him. I voyed up here myself.’

Taye’s face flits from me to his twin at my shoulder. His ánimo is too noisy still. I need to grasp onto a cogent stream. ‘Yes, Velox, worry about your little *almano*’s guilt,’ he growls. The Sensorial term is absurd but he can’t reach for language he doesn’t understand. ‘Ye are perfect for each other, veritly. Ye both wit how to gain someone’s max cred and then shatter it.’

‘Do you want to dict juxt?’

‘Which one of us chose silence all these years? Huh?’ The ferocity ripples through him with patrician presumption. It’s Niobe in him. ‘I tried everybit to contact you. You didn’t respond. So, live in silence. Bathe in it.’ He sends Kehinde toppling onto the pavement.

Then he stills, looks at me and eases his face towards mine. The feelingstreams are a torrent of strange and shattered things. His ánimo is there somewhere, but slipping from me. I can’t interpret the steady closeness of flesh. His lips brush my cheek, electric and expiratory, releasing so soon I hardly know what just happened. He pushes again, this time a feral lingering at my lips.

He cuts it and lets me see the malevolence in his face – the satisfaction at fooling me, hurt for hurt.

Chapter 21

Someone's trying to console me. Or bring me to my senses. I don't know how I got back to the apartment or how I've ended up I think in the living room with liquid coaxed into my mouth. I wriggle against it but a voice keeps saying, 'Just drink it, mijo! You need it.' I cough and splutter. Something vegetal goes down my throat. I want to gag but it numbs calms numbs at the nerves the wounds the … I …

I think my knees are knocking at my eyes. My legs are pulled tight. I'm rocking, rocking, rocking, sniffing. A familiar voice says, 'You're good. That stuff is calming him.'

'Just be grateful my magiary didn't null out,' comes another voice. Illustrious Hightongue that doesn't want to be itself.

My eyes are gunky. 'He's back,' says Mamá. She's rubbing my shoulders. 'Mijo, you passed out on the pavement. Must have been a sobrecarga.' Kehinde is leaning against the living room threshold, head down but eyes piercing. 'He botanicked our inhibidor, made it soothing. It should calm you down.'

My nerves are raw. 'Kehinde,' I say, looking at him. 'I'm sorry. I fucked it all up for you.'

I expect to sense his reaction, but the inhibidor is powerful. He nods vacantly.

'We can all agree that could have been handled better,' says Mamá, sharing a glance with Kehinde. 'There's a meeting at the Centro Comunitario.'

'A meeting? About what?'

She inclines her head to the crystalslab, which is still projecting news. What was a mass is now a sea stretching dozens and dozens of blocks. 'The Barrio wants Sapiente to give them answers about what's happening.'

'Somebit is merging on at the Grand Council,' says Kehinde, as if the line signified sudden doom.

Mamá adjusts her glasses. 'Velox told Glouw to convene the Grand Council,' she tells me.

'Strange move to convene the secretive Grand Council while elections for half the Subcouncil have been disrupted,' says Kehinde. 'Proffa, you wit what she's facking.'

She ignores him and asks me, 'Would you like me to read your pensario? Give you some insight into what just happened?'

'Do my thoughts sound like I've processed anything?'

She looks at me forcefully. ‘Mijo, the conexión between you and Taye …’ She pretends to struggle to find words. ‘It isn’t as real as you want it to be.’

I stare at her. Kehinde circles. ‘The problem, Mamá, is I don’t know what I want it to be.’

‘Why isn’t it real?’ asks Kehinde, his voice almost playfully soft. How does he switch so quickly into that smirk?

Mamá stands up, irritated. ‘The two of you need to process things, you especially.’ She points at Kehinde. ‘Would you like me to tell you why you begged not to see Taye, and a few seconds later you were out that door?’ In an instant, Kehinde looks dangerous. Mamá nods in satisfaction. ‘Miguel, I’ve watched this conexión forming for weeks now. At first, I thought it was innocent and maybe a chance for you to bond with a man beyond sacia. Clearly, Isabel wasn’t going to meet that need, or you wouldn’t let her. You’ve been craving something emotional, a masculine energy, mijo. Conexiones are formed mutually. That’s the deal. *This* came about because you sensed too much from him, influenced by a narcotic, yes, and you started craving the rush of access to his ánimo, not the bond itself, not him himself. You just wander around with him, getting caught up in his family’s drama. I can’t tell if your pensario reads more like you or him right now.’

‘Are you jealous of my bond with him or just scared you’ll lose yourself in Valora’s pensario too?’ I ask rapidly, instantly regretting it. Her analysis is overwrought, a caricature of what cannot be a clear reading, shouldn’t be clear, but the gist is true enough to prick.

Mamá doesn’t speak for a while, but when she does, she’s calmer, more tender than I expected. ‘I just don’t like seeing you be so passive with him.’

‘Isn’t that how I’ve always been though? Actually, you and Leonor too.’

She shrugs. ‘I’ll be at the Centro. For the second time today.’ On her way past Kehinde, she squeezes his shoulders and says, ‘Don’t go back down there. Your pensario is wounded.’ She leaves him to stare at the closed front door.

Suddenly I’m laughing, headily, deliriously, physically. My body collapses into it. It’s a silly release, but it just comes and comes and comes. ‘What?’ Kehinde asks nervously. ‘Is this how ye act after a clash up?’

‘No, not that,’ I sputter. ‘It’s that my sister always said she’d like to see me fall apart over a boy someday. It was Taye fucking Velox!’ His hands are fiddling with a groove in the wood behind him, making his body move back and forth absentmindedly. His inhibidor is good, almost as powerful as being under scrubbers. Did he carry me up here? ‘What I said about my mother being jealous, that wasn’t fair to you.’

‘I don’t envy your relationship with your own mother,’ he says.

‘What about my relationship with Taye?’

His jaw twitches. He sways a few more times, back and forth against the wall. ‘You wit, he was veritous. Taye. About how he tried to dict to me after I left the Mastery all those years ago.’ His attention is on the floor. ‘He sent hundreds of pings, chimed me max times, for months. I just couldn’t reply. What was I supposed to dict to him? He wist why I left. He wist what my parents were trying to do to me, that I didn’t belong in that family, in that synod, in that whole world.’

‘Can I tell you how you’re not like him?’ I ask, struggling to ignore the reminder of the rupture that just happened. ‘You unload. Confess. Verbalise. He just feels.’

Kehinde bristles. He folds his arms. ‘I chose to obb here. I should have wist it was a risk I’d juxt into him.’ The newscast is showing a stern-looking Niobe arriving at the Needle, at the same landing pad I was brought to recently. Kehinde watches his mother with angled eyes. ‘Can I dict you somebit?’ I arch my eyebrows. ‘What Taye facked in the flycar earlier, that’s what he does.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You wit what.’ I get up and pretend to need something in the kitchen. ‘It’s what he does. Veritly,’ he says behind me. ‘He obbs people close, then huffs up with their feelings. Plays with them. He does it with every woman he’s dazzled over, to his friends, did it to me all the max time. Every relationship revolves around him. I cogged you’d have sensed it in him.’

My hands are fussing with the kitchen crystalslab. He reclines against the doorway in that characteristic shade of frontage. ‘Is that how you moved through the Kinetic world when you were younger? The lazy observer in shady corners, over-weary of everyone?’

He glitters at that. ‘You didn’t wit what he’s like?’ My hands are shaking on the countertop. I try to shrug off the stickiness of the conversation. ‘I cogged you sensed him max through.’

‘I did,’ I say quietly, keeping my gaze on the crystalslab text. ‘Believe me, I sensed every part of him. Every part. He isn’t like that anymore.’

‘If that’s verit, why did he bring you to the brink of lust, just to drop you? I vizzed your reaction.’ He reaches over me to the crystalslab, swiping to a wakesage option. Quanta tendrils into dry leaves on the glass. He moves his hand slowly, almost caressingly, botanicking each piece into thick, purple-blue foliage. ‘Steep this,’ he says. ‘It’ll be more potent.’

He doesn’t move out the way again. His arm remains over the leaves, stretching across me, his torso so close I can smell the dust and see the spindly scars on his neck, crossing over flesh and muscle. His mouth flashes a taunting smile. There’s hunger in his eyes, but that isn’t new.

Maybe for a moment it's avarice. But where Taye pushed, Kehinde is still. His inhibidor still blunts my magiary, yet there's a dull fizz in the narrow space.

'I'm not him,' he says, his vocal cords barely snapping over the air.

'I know.' But I don't. Hints of Taye crease through his skin, his persona, the intensity of his stillness.

'I'm not a stand-in for him.' He shifts an inch. It's a greedy motion, but he stalls it.

'I know.'

Again the scorn-tinged tease of a smile. 'You don't understand.'

I jut my shoulder into the crook of his. The contact breaks the detente, sed collapsing into sacia. He seizes my back, clasping me to him. My body singes at the unfamiliarity of his musculature. His mouth pulls at my neck, lifts and presses against my mouth, steady but greedy. We break for a crackling moment, both calculating but failing. I move to him slowly this time, more certain this is reckless, projective, impulsive, but I press into him gradually, finding the thrill of skin under the shirt, desire returned, dual maleness mirrored in dual vulnerabilities.

His hand pulses under my ribs, finds my waist, pauses. He lifts his face for a second in query. My reply is my hand on his wrist, pushing down until he finds my crotch. He gentles slows tightens cradles me in his other arm inhibidor still there but too weak to block the depth of his ánimo flooding into me now raw and strange desire and shame and longing and thirst find kin in my ánimo I release into it find it too heady too intense too max to keep control handle so I pull out but settle back back to him finding him hardening into my hand …

There's catharsis in being held by him. His shame shimmers in the sentido, but its suppression is so alike mine that I let the embrace linger. I feel at once used and using.

He grunts as his body realises the painful position he's ended up in, contorted against cupboard angles on the kitchen floor. He hesitates before standing. The concern for me feels too sudden to be overwrought. My brain is looking for signs of hurt now, like with all the others. He's licking his lips too long.

'I should go down to the Centro Comunitario,' I say, avoiding his eyes. 'See what's happening.'

'I'm not him,' he says, so softly I almost don't hear it. But the feeling calls for me. He's tracing his finger over the counter.

'Sensorials can teach you a thing or two about the benefits of sacia.'

Chapter 22

The Centro Comunitario is crammed, even heaving. Subcouncillor Sapiente is trying to placate what looks like most residents of the Barrio. The verbal grunts and scoffs and jeers are polite compared to the seething in the sentido común; it's a parallel argument of feeling. At least it's enough to distract me from whatever it was I've just done, though I'm grateful some of Kehinde's inhibidor is still in my bloodstream.

Señor Pensado has ended up the spokesman for a lot of my block's residents who are squeezed in the middle aisles, practically flowing onto the stage where Sapiente has nothing but a small wooden lectern to shield him. 'What are those protesters doing, Vuestra Eminencia?' Pensado calls. 'If they wanted change, they could simply have voted for it. Now they've prevented voting in their own synods!'

Sapiente's politic smile is struggling. 'Señor Pensado, the protesters' motives are contradictory like they always are.' He gets cheers and boos for that. 'From what I understand, it began last night with a small group in a Barotic neighbourhood protesting against the Isle's Migration. Today, elements of the criminal Lowburb resistance movement piggybacked on the protest to create chaos. That is what is happening.'

There are hoots of agreement. Pensado yells, 'So must we just allow them to cancel the election?'

'I understand, señor,' says Sapiente, 'but I assure you, I assure everyone, the situation is under control. Elections in the Upperburbs went off without disruption. Those subcouncillors will be seated as normal. In the Midburbs, the Sensorials, Aquials, Mediciants and Electrients also completed polls. The Subcouncil will have legitimate subcouncillors from all those areas. The President of the Subcouncil assured me herself!' The laughter that follows drowns him out.

'Under control?' Pensado cries. 'The Lowburbers look like they want to invade the Needle! And now, why has the Grand Council been convened? I'll tell you why.' A chunk of the crowd urges him on. 'All those seats where voting was disrupted, they're the seats the Progressives thought they'd win! They knew they were on path to lose, as our dear Señora Recibiz's seerscope so accurately predicted, because, well, the Progs are useless. So, the Barotics thought they'd create chaos to cast doubt on the whole election. Why else would the Progs have started it? They're hers!' His colleagues make a show of mock enlightenment. 'Now Velox, their leader,

is going behind everyone's backs, calling the Grand Council to meet behind closed doors so she can get them to elect her Grand Master, all while the Subcouncil elections would have proven her caucus too weak! We see it! We reelected you this morning. Do your job!'

Sapiente pinches his nose. 'Oíd, I cannot speak for Plenipotentiary Velox,' he says.

'She can!' calls someone. They're pointing at Bienoyente, who until now has been nodding with the crowd.

'She's the leader of your caucus!' screams a woman near me.

Bienoyente tries to answer, but she has to be pushed on stage before anyone can hear her properly. Sapiente looks torn between amusement and threat at his defeated rival sharing a platform with him. 'Oíd, I'm not the Barrio subcouncillor.' The crowd can't decide if it's pleased with that or not. 'All I know is Plenipotentiary Velox asked for an emergency meeting of the Grand Council to address the *unrest*. All this speculation that she's trying to topple Superpotentiary Glouw is just that, speculation! The Subcouncil election must proceed. Whatever has caused that protest down at the Needle is an expression of frustration with years of Preservist overreach. The Progressives champion the rights of all Potents. We have no interest in disrupting the elections.'

'But what about the riot?' asks Pensado.

'It will be handled, Señor Pensado,' says Sapiente. 'The Guard have been deployed. I will personally ask for Guard to be stationed in the Barrio, even at the streetlift to the second streetlevel, just in case there's spillover.'

'How can you promise that? You're just a subcouncillor! Where's Plenipotenciario Sabrador?'

Sapiente is defeated. I notice Mamá standing on the other side of the hall with her arms folded and her face inquisitive. Valora is near her, as are her spouses who look ready to riot themselves.

Sapiente tries to continue, 'It's a Lowburb scuffle' – the hectoring is instantaneous – 'a protest. Oíd, it looks scary on the news, I understand. They're Lowburbers with an axe to grind against the establishment. You know how this works. We've seen it plenty of times.'

'We've never seen them try to breach the Needle!' says Pensado.

'It was foreseen!' warbles Señora Recibiz. 'This affects all of us, nosotros todos. I told you darkness was coming. It was in the futuario común!' There are hoots of agreement and some jeers at Recibiz's dodgy clairvoyance.

Sapiente says, ‘Señora Recibiz, we have all been so blessed with your divinations of late, but respectfully they are not canon.’

There’s a chorus of yeses. ‘You’re censoring seerscopes!’ shrieks a delirious man close by. It’s only when I see him that I notice Isabel, deep in the crowd, thumbing a cargita. ‘Censoring, os digo! You don’t want ordinary Clairvoyants telling us the truth because then we’ll know you’ve been cozying up with the Upperburb elites!’

The room is clarifying into those who agree with the man’s conspiratorial bent and Recibiz’s honour, and those convinced their neighbours have lost their minds. The sentido común is a wall of indignation now, except for a thread of an ánimo on the periphery that I thought I’d left in my kitchen. There he is. But not leaning. He’s weaving into the crowd too quickly to be looking for a good spot. I squeeze through jeerers. He keeps ducking away when I think I’ve reached him. There’s a commotion near the stage. Someone’s trying to show Sapiente something on their crystalpod. ‘Mira, mira!’ they call. ‘It’s happened!’

I see Kehinde’s motion now. He’s heading for Mamá. Through crystalpods and moving hands, I see her retreat from her position to the edge of the room. It takes some heavy pushing to get through to them. When Mamá sees me, she beckons to a spot behind a pillar. It’s just about as secluded as possible in the increasingly furious hall. She rubs her temple against the pensado común. ‘Kinetic officials are outside,’ she tells me.

‘What kind of officials?’ I ask.

‘Daniel Springform,’ says Kehinde in a searing low tone. ‘And Mastery security.’

‘Taye must have told them he saw you,’ I say. ‘That was quick.’

‘What would they want with you now?’ Mamá asks Kehinde. ‘It’s been years. Surely they’ve known where you’ve been, what you’ve been doing.’

Kehinde’s neck is taut. ‘I don’t wit. I was already outwise when I vizzed the flycars. Springform obbed out, walked sliply into your building. I’ve put you at risk.’

‘He might not be here for you,’ I say. ‘It wouldn’t be the first time he’s been sent to summon me to your mother.’ The mention of Niobe sends a prickle through his ánimo, throbbing away the last effects of the inhibidor.

‘Don’t worry, Proffa. I’ll voy out.’

‘No. You chose to come to us, Kehinde,’ she says. ‘Let’s get out of this hall first. I can’t think with all these thoughtstreams around me.’

We're only in the atrium when I notice, through the open doors and across the streetgap, the distinctive dark flycar right in front of our apartment building, even in the near-night light. I pull Mamá and Kehinde behind the wall so we're out of sight.

Mamá turns to Kehinde. 'Right. What are we doing?' she asks with intensity. 'Are we getting you away from here or do you want to talk to this Springform mach?

He's rubbing his hands together. 'I'll voy out,' he says. 'You've been too kind, Proffa. You too, in your way.' He smiles at me. 'I ken the Lowburbs. I'll be drifty. I should've stayed there anywise.'

'No,' I tell him with enough energy to make Mamá's ánimo twitch. 'You came here to escape Kinetics, Kehinde. A few hours can't have changed that,' I say.

Mamá is pointing to her chiming crystalpod. 'It's Leonor,' she says. She steps from us to take the call.

Despite what he said, Kehinde isn't going. He leans out for a moment so he can see through the doors across the streetgap. With Mamá not focused on us, the physical familiarity between us tingles. 'Do you really think Taye went straight to your mother? And her first thought was to summon you?' I ask him.

His head hangs, but his eyes are scoring. 'No. They could have done that max times. Somebit else is happening. I just can't viz it yet.'

Mamá comes back with a surge in her feelingstream that catches me off guard, even with all these Sensorials nearby. 'Mamá? What happened?' I ask.

'Your sister is with them,' she says. 'And Señor Buscador, Sabrador's fixer.'

'What?'

'They want to speak to both of us, mijo. They don't seem to know about you, Kehinde, or they're not saying.'

Kehinde scratches at the bruise under his eye. 'I'll juxt you,' he says.

'A minute ago, you told us you wanted to run. Now you want to confront the Kinetics?' asks Mamá. Kehinde squints at her. There's something protective in him, a glint amid an otherwise fragile ánimo. 'Niñero, you don't know what you want.'

'I undercog you don't want Niobe to find out you've been helping me,' Kehinde says. Mamá glowers at him. 'Daniel Springform is her private secretary. He's max dangerous, Proffa. You need someone who kens Kinetic politics there.'

'Wait,' I say. 'This doesn't make any sense. I did the sensorigraph she wanted. She has the evidence she needed. What would she want with you, Mamá?'

‘We have history,’ Mamá replies lightly. Her crystalpod is chiming again. ‘If we’re going to attempt something reckless, now’s the time.’

‘Mamá?’ That’s Leonor’s voice – just outside. ‘I can read your pensarios. They just want to talk about Taye Velox. Mamá?’

‘She knows there’s another pensario with us,’ whispers Mamá.

‘Then let’s give old Springform some exteria,’ Kehinde says.

His ánimo is churning through feelingstreams too rapid and ephemeral, but he manages to swagger out the atrium, through the doors, hands loosely in pockets, clothes still dirty, head still scarred, for a confrontation that he hasn’t planned but seems to need.

Mamá straightens her glasses and follows Kehinde. Her small frame writhes with defiance.

I curse to the walls around me before I step out too, knowing things could spiral so quickly with the individuals who are about to meet on a Sensorial building’s steps.

Chapter 23

Daniel Springform is at the bottom of the staircase, facing the streetgap while talking into his crystalpod. Dovetry is next to him. She doesn't seem to recognise Kehinde, nor does Buscador next to her. The anticlimax doesn't deflate him. He stands in leering triumph.

Leonor's ánimo is a riot of worry and conflict as she watches Mamá and me emerge through the entryway. Mamá doesn't acknowledge Leonor, though I'm sure telepathic jibes are being exchanged. Our mother descends until she's a few steps higher than Daniel, forming a vertical dynamic that Daniel could easily bluster through with his higher magiary. Kehinde follows in a slow yet somehow fierce saunter. He and Mamá form an odd alliance.

'Is that who I think it is?' Leonor whispers to me, nodding to Kehinde. I ignore her and join Mamá and Kehinde on the stairs.

Dovetry has to nudge Daniel to end the crystalcall and notice we're here. He smiles at me like we're old friends and nods slightly to Mamá, but when he sees Kehinde his ánimo bolts, vibrant and callous. Kehinde's feelingstream follows in a nervous, fiery burst. The juxtaposition of the suave Kinetic dignitary and the flippant outcast is striking. Both men were born in that synod, but one has the bearing and colouring that gives him hauteur. Kehinde never stood a chance.

'Sire,' says Daniel. I detect something affectionate in his tone – and surprise. Dovetry is confused. She hands Daniel what looks like a scrubber. It takes him a moment to shake himself from Kehinde's glare. He taps the scrubber and the sentido común vanishes. Leonor, moving down the stairs too now so she's to the side of the standoff, gives us a glance. The sensory silence that follows is as eerie as it is satisfying, though I can infer the tension just from the positioning of people around these Sensorial stairs. 'Professor Vidente, I apologise for the intrusion on your time,' Daniel says, querying Kehinde again.

'Why is my synodic master's consigliere here too?' asks Mamá. Buscador is motionless. 'And my daughter? Is the plan to have her cognigraph us?' Leonor is watching me with an expression I can't decipher.

Daniel remains serene. 'I need to ask you where Taye Velox is.'

'You can't find Taye?' I ask.

Daniel's necklace coils serpent-like. 'He was here earlier,' he says. 'We wit that much. Where did he voy?'

'I cogged ye surveilled all the Veloxes all the max time, Danny,' Kehinde coos.

Mamá folds her arms with professorial chagrin. 'I understand the Upperburbers employ Sensorials for all sorts of Charter violations now,' she says.

'Where did he voy?' Daniel repeats.

'We don't know. He didn't leave here happy exactly,' I say.

His tone is even, but his eyes sizzle. 'Why would that be? I cogged ye were closer than lovers. Was there a clash up?'

'Why would there be a clash up?' Kehinde asks the wind. He's caressing his voice with enough irony to make Daniel's necklace flutter.

'We don't know where he went, Potentiary Springform,' says Mamá. 'He was using one of Plenipotentiary Velox's official flycars, if that helps.'

'How you been lose him, Danny, in a car that you been own?' Kehinde asks. The tipping into Lowtongue is a knife in the scrubbered air.

Buscador, who has been watching with barely restrained confusion, asks Daniel, 'Who is this man?'

Daniel ignores him and turns to me. 'Advocate Vidente, you'll need to voy with us to the Needle. You can assist us to find Taye from there.'

'No,' I say with more emphasis than I expected. Daniel cocks his head almost in amusement.

'That wasn't the plan,' says Leonor, stepping between the two groups.

Daniel doesn't flinch. 'It wasn't a question. You've been summoned. I would have cogged you'd want to help find him.'

'You don't have the jurisdiction to detain me.'

'As an advocate under Kinetic sponsorship, I can.'

'And does the Sensorial Mastery agree with this?' Mamá asks Buscador. 'Is that why you're here?'

'I'm here to make sure our interests aren't subverted,' says Buscador, turning to Daniel. For the first time, Daniel and Dovetry might be outnumbered.

'I'm not going with you, Springform,' I say. 'The last time I did, I was paraded before the High Tribunal. I did what Plenipotentiary Velox asked and she allowed me to leave. Taye left here only a few hours ago. I'm sure he'll reappear. Isn't he an adult?'

Daniel's necklace is slowing, almost coiling to spring. I don't know how powerful his magiary is, but I don't want to take any chances. Mamá and Leonor are exchanging incomprehensible glances. Dovetry is watching the doors behind us.

Daniel slowly walks up the steps until he's level with me. 'Advocate, do not miscog your sway or the limits of your rights here.' I wonder if he can see or sense the fear shaking my throat. 'You are required at the Needle. We can escort you sliply, as we did last time, or we can fack it more difficultly.'

'Potentiary Springform,' says Mamá, moving until she is eye-to-eye with Daniel too, 'can you help me understand something? If my son did everything he was asked by your Plenipotentiary Velox and was allowed to leave the Kinetic Mastery, an assurance I was given by Pierre Velox personally, why all of a sudden do you want him back? You can find Taye easily – don't pretend that's the reason you're here.'

'The reason be slip-like, Proffa,' comes Kehinde's voice. He's sitting on the steps now, regarding the scene with a glib detachment that I know, even under the scrubber, belies the intensity of his ánimo. But that posture is facetious and calm and grinding. 'They be fright-like for what Miguel know from the sensorigraph.'

'And why are you bonding around with them now?' snaps Daniel. His composure has slipped. His necklace and the veins on his neck are throbbing.

Kehinde's mouth plays towards a victorious smile. This confrontation, this clash of Kinetic and rejected, must have been brewing for years in his mind. Its incarnation is happening in an incongruous place, but it is happening. His ease, his seated pose, his Lowtongue mark him spectacularly against Daniel's Kinetic arrogance. Kehinde looks across the streetgap as if this conversation is boring him. Mamá is relieved by this. There are too many layers of secrets here, intersecting with confusing politics and loyalties.

'Deactivate the scrubber,' says Buscador.

'Oh, he won't let that happen now,' says Mamá. 'That young man is right. This must be about the information Miguel gleaned in the sensorigraph. But he had that information when he was allowed to come home yesterday. Why is it a problem now? And again, why is my master's consigliere here?'

'Because Sabrador insisted.'

'He already sensed the sensorigraph from me, Mamá,' I add.

Daniel laughs lightly. 'The point is, Professor, your son is required at the Needle. He is not being detained or arrested or harmed in any—'

He's cut off by a snigger that tumbles into sneering laughter. Kehinde leans back on his arms, shaking his head. 'You not been change, Danny,' he caterwauls. 'You say one thing, sound raw Upper-like—'

'And I viz you've taken to Lowtongue now.'

'For y'tongue be too high for *mine* mouth.' The glower is back, his language liquid and defiant. 'I see what this be. You been worry not yesterday, for Niobe Velox been juss Kin'ic Masser then.' He smiles. 'She done it, clear? She be Grand Masser now.'

The words hang. They're too momentous to be serious. But no one denies them. Kehinde's eyes are pincer-like on Daniel. Only the sounds of footsteps inside the Centro punctuate the awkwardness.

Mamá is the first to speak again. 'So, just as a huge protest immobilises the Lowburbs, with her old Midburb synod leading the protests, or being led, whichever, and disrupted elections to the Subcouncil, Niobe Velox went to the Needle, convened the one body that sits above the Subcouncil and meets behind closed doors, and had them overthrow Fredericka Glouw with no public mandate, no published electoral results, least of all from the Lowburbs?'

'And the information I got from the sensorigraph is now a risk to the head of state, not just an opposition leader,' I say.

Kehinde cackles again. 'The Lowers a go be mad at this,' he taunts. 'They been think the Progs be try a be for them, but now they been a nap power 'hind them. It be a coup!'

Daniel has been calculating. 'So, you viz now. The summons is from the new Grand Master herself. Maybe you should juxt us, sire,' he says to Kehinde.

'If she been want me, she could been ask self-wise. I be not with you. I never been, Danny,' Kehinde says, his voice scissoring and final.

The impasse is going to break and the scrubber is stopping me from knowing if it will be violent. I can hear the Barrio exiting the hall inside. The meeting must be over. They'll be streaming onto the staircase within seconds. 'Last chance, Vidente,' says Daniel.

As soon as the first Sensorials come through the entryway, Dovetry and Daniel lurch, but my body reacts instantly with Taye's magiary, still somehow here, within my reach. Waves, familiar by now but still strange, swirl from my nerves and snap into the air, halting the Kinetics by unseen force. Something moves next to me that I can't see. Suddenly there are people on the steps, casual conversations, worried expressions, Sensorial chatter. I can't see where the others are, but the scrubber is off and their ánimos are nearby.

I slip with the crowd to the pavement and duck. There's a commotion somewhere to the left – someone tripping. I can feel waves curling through the air for me. I throw them back, craning to see where Mamá and Leonor are. And Kehinde.

My foot gives way. I collapse to concrete. Something tugs again. I throw waves behind me until the hold releases and clamber up. The sentido is anxious. People know something is wrong, that hostile ánimos are here.

'Miguel!' hisses someone next to me. I whirl around and almost throw Kehinde into the air.

'Do you want to voy with them or not?' he whispers, looking around with jittery eyes. He yanks me behind a shadowed corner. Kinetickry is calling for me again. Where are Mamá and Leonor? 'Miguel! Do you want to voy with them?'

'No, of course not,' I say.

He holds my shoulder. 'The Lowburbs are the only place you can be lost from them for now. I'll obb you.'

'But you can't go back there, Kehinde.'

'I will obb you,' he says, tightening his hold. 'I rewit where the nearest streetlift is.'

'I can't ask you to—' A barrel appears, thrust right at his chest. 'Leonor, no!'

'You're a Velox, aren't you?' my sister asks without looking at us. Her head is searching through the Sensorials around the corner. She has a pyregun, live, whining, pointed at Kehinde. 'Aren't you?'

'Leonor!'

'Mamá thought to me to get you. And him. She's taking Buscador to the subcouncillor. But those Kinetics are close, just distracted. I can hear their thoughtstreams. You're another Velox!'

'And you're SIB. Firm Midburb job,' says Kehinde. She drops the weapon, looks back.

'Fuck it, I read what you asked him,' says Leonor. 'You'll need someone with a pyregun down there.'

'A SIB agent with a pyregun is not a firm idea in the Lowburbs!'

Someone has fallen down the stairs again. They're going to keep tripping people until they find us. They're closing in. 'The SIB can fuck itself. Let's go before—'

All of a sudden, the world twists from me. I'm flailing, can't see anything or feel gravity. I throw waves around, everywhere, trying to halt the motion.

My shoulder hits something hard and I tumble and tumble and kick and scramble out of the momentum. I'm on tar again, try to get my bearings. Dovetry is inches from me. She twists her

hand. Just as her kinetickry tickles my skin, my nerves fire, Taye's magiary surging through vein and flesh and bone to deflect hers. The collision of waves tears through the air.

Sensorials duck and the sentido flashes scared but defiant too much too much to handle the sentido Dovetry dives again but I throw her back Daniel whips wave too I surge collide against his more powerful kinetickry blasting the street with twisting tumbling waves that tear the air into gusts that send people running Daniel flying Dovetry flying I'm pulled again, tugged rather, this time by something stringy a vine—

'Quickly!' Kehinde … I focus, focus the feelingstream and follow them down an alley …

Chapter 24

Kehinde argues that we should get to ground level through old staircases so Daniel and Dovetry don't tail us, but Leonor insists getting down quickly is safer, so she leads us through a tiny alleyway between Barrio buildings until we're near a small streetlift I seldom use. We have to wait in the alley for a Sensorial couple to enter the lift shaft. Adrenaline is still heavy and pumping in the sentido between us.

'Won't they just track us cognigraphically?' I whisper.

'The Pyrrhics won't have given up control of the cognigraphers yet, if they even know Velox is the GM now,' Leonor says.

'Since when can you use kinetickry?' Kehinde asks in a frothy sneer. His ánimo churls at the question, despite the panic. He can't hide his anger. I used the magiary he could never produce.

'It's his kinetickry, technically,' I reply.

'Once we're down there, you lead the way, Velox,' Leonor says. The mention of his birth surname makes his ánimo spark. 'Alright, streetlift's clear.'

The metal floor grates and rumbles as we descend. Kehinde is on his haunches, staring out the single window as the second streetlevel rises above us. I'm leaning against the rail on one side, Leonor on the other. She's twirling her SIB brooch between her fingers. 'Are you sure Mamá will be alright with Buscador and Sapiente?' I ask.

She keeps staring at the brooch. 'Her thoughtstream sounded more excited than she's been in years. You know how she is. She and Buscador found each other just as the Barrio came out the Centro,' Leonor replies.

'Doesn't mean it was a wise decision, Leonor.'

'So, you're the sister who works for the SIB,' says Kehinde.

Leonor regards him. She's probably sifted through a good chunk of his pensario by now. 'Your mother promoted me. I'm still trying to work out why—

shouting streets crammed
glorious giddy lowburbers everywise
I've never vizzed this could never people everywhere
children elderly marching

pushing at the needle so high from here can't see the beam—

'Miguel?' comes a voice. Leonor's. 'Miguel, your pensario is—

I keep back from them they wouldn't undercog

I viz like her sharing crystalpods they viz her

the video the stream elevating imperial—

'Miguel?'

'Taye's down there,' I say. Neither knows how to respond to that. 'Did either of you bring your crystalpod? Turn on the news. Now. He's watching it too.'

The world is doubling through the enlarged screen refracting off Leonor's crystalpod and the little images in the Lowburbs where Taye is watching. I sense him in a crowd, craning over shoulders to see the stream.

Niobe Velox is still wearing her Progressive pink uniform. It's so casual against the ancient doors to the Grand Council chamber behind her. 'Fellow citizens of the Society of the Potent,' she says in an accent so Midtongue it rips against her brand, 'the mass of energy, protest, anguish being borne as I speak from the citadel of our island refuge, by communities so often overlooked and unheard, is a humbling call to reassess the priorities of this nation.'

Kehinde turns from the screen. For a moment I feel him reach for the familiarity of our bodies, but it disappears in the still heady feelingstream from Taye that flickers through my awareness.

'Elections for the Subcouncil have been disrupted in the Botanial, Zoonic, Cryonic, Thermic, Physetic and Barotic synods. While other communities were able to elect their representatives as normal, it is clear that we will not be able to seat a full Subcouncil until elections can be run again. Now, I understand the grievances that have led to this moment. The Island was moved without your consent. We have been taken towards colder waters and frostier climes. Members of our Societal Service, young people serving the Society in the Impotentate just as generations have done before them, were ripped from their bases and extradited from their assigned areas, deprived of honouring the traditions of their fathers. All of this is on the say-so of a Grand Master who has treated your concerns with disdain. She hasn't even had the decency to tell you *why.* She and her Preservist masters on the Grand Council and supporters in the Subcouncil have ruled this Society with indifference and entitlement. Why would she bother to give you *reasons*? But you know that I didn't come from that world up there, her club, in those Upperburb mansions, with those Pyrrhics and Quantics and Luminents and, yes, those Kinetics who have passed power between themselves for centuries. I came from a humbler place. I came

from a people who knew that we are all the historic exiles of those persecuted for the mere presence of magium in their veins, for the powers they demonstrated, for the wisdom and generosity of their supernatural contributions to humankind for aeons. Those exiles made a home here on this Magial Isle. My Barotic family raised me to believe that.'

'Your Barotic family are social climbers who glimmer like Kinetics now,' Kehinde says to his mother's holographic face. 'You hate the Barotics. They were too small for you!'

'But you know the story isn't so rosy. Of course you know. The home the exiles created was unequal from the start. Look at me. I was tainted, from the wrong bloodline. Outcast from the synod of my magiary. But potency is diverse. We can govern ourselves in new ways, better ways, more equal and fairer ways so that the next girl like me can live a full life without a fight. That has always been the mission of the Progressive Caucus. We may have only paid lip service to it in the past, I acknowledge that, but now we have a chance to prove that we mean what we have preached.

'Dearest citizens, a few minutes ago, the Grand Council met to address the ongoing protests and the disruption of electoral operations, which we agreed represented a crisis of confidence in the Grand Master. I spoke for the righteous anger of all of you out on those streets, and those of you in your homes across this Isle. His Magnificence Plenipotentiary Sabrador, Master of the great Sensorial Synod, called a motion of confidence in Her Supremacy. That motion, it is my duty to convey, was carried. I was then shocked and humbled and honoured to accept the nomination by Plenipotentiary Sabrador to stand for election as Grand Master. My friends, the Grand Council united and it is the honour of my life to accept my election to the Hallowed Throne – a girl of the Midburbs has ascended even here.

'I say to all of you who have so bravely stood in these streets, giving your voices to justice, go home, brummas. You been hear by us. Go to y'kins and y'syns and prepare for the change that a go come, but go home-wise, brummas! I am issuing an immediate curfew—

they're not voying home they're furious

my mother just changed chairs on the council they dict

she can't clear the streets

the streets are alive with energy and music and thrumming not joy at this news at this sor who vizzes like many of them it's not verit I need to voy out voy out why was I cogging exterious nonsense voying down here what I did I cog kehinde kehinde's up there in the midburbs with miguel why would he when did that happen those those

out get out get of my head get out get out get out get out

‘My vir!’ Kehinde’s shaking me. ‘We’re here. Voy out Taye’s head.’

‘Leonor, are you sure you want to be here with us? They’ll fire you. Or worse,’ I say.

She swipes her crystalpod off and puts it in her coat. She twirls her brooch one more time before pocketing it too. ‘If the new Grand Master wants to clear these streets, you’ll need my help to navigate the Guard,’ she says.

‘No offence, Vidente, but do you have any training to handle the Lowburbs in real time?’ Kehinde asks. She just purses her lips.

Chapter 25

We're in a side street at ground level, a narrow tunnel of ancient brick and old campaign posters for Lowburb anarchists and Progressives. Their icky smiles pepper vertical surfaces and the grime on the ground.

Leonor has her pyregun out and she's pacing and peering through the foliage, which I assume means we're in the Botanial Quarter. It's dark down here even at daytime, but the curfew-emptying streetlevels leave only prickles of night light. 'By the way, Velox, your mother told me about you days ago,' she says. 'She wanted your pensario off the cognigraphers' radars.'

'You've known about him since then?' I ask.

'Not Mamá's involvement,' she says, putting her fingers at her temples. 'They aren't listening to the curfew.'

'You're veritly in her household then,' says Kehinde. I can sense his ánimo fluttering between unutterable peaks. Leonor's is steadier. Magon knows what state mine is in. My body just keeps moving. My eyes keep seeing. I can hear echoing zaps of pyreshotfire and shouting in the distance. I try to probe the sentido común, but it's just a background blur. 'We need to blend in with the protest.'

'Or we could avoid the protest and not get arrested for breaking the curfew.'

'You dicted you'd cred me, so cred me. We need to lose Miguel in a crowd that Springform won't want to voy near.'

We hear the crowd from blocks away and I sense it like a gathering tidal wave. Just as we turn a corner from a street of locked Botanial groweries to a major thoroughfare, we meet the tail of the stream. The curfew isn't clearing the streets so much as attracting the fury of more and more Lowburbers, pulling them from passages and building exits and locked wakesage breweries against the sudden crackdown. They might have been protesting against Frederika Glouw earlier, but Niobe Velox's coup has fallen limp down here. 'How did Isabel ever think the Progs were popular down here?' asks Leonor as she looks to the left, at least a mile away, where the crowd thickens into a hoard of humanity, cacophonous chanting and, at the very end, the telltale blurs of Barotic charges, blasts of fire and the glint of Cryonic icemists, before the Needle's shimmering marble barricade.

‘Mamá knew,’ I say. Kehinde shakes his head at us. There’s a vivacity entering him now. Even in the darkness and at this distance, we can see the Guard’s gold flycars around the base of the Needle. They’re trying to push against the tide. Kehinde goes without being prompted. He weaves between people, bumping and pushing at times, and Leonor and I try to follow. The proximity of so many ánimos pushes at my magiary. It’s a mix of fear and rage and confusion and revulsion, coagulating into a unifying, propulsive feeling. Most people around us appear Lowburb, but I see the occasional flash of Midburb fashion. The Barotics are in clusters. They look like lost academics, urbane and kempt around Lowburb life, but their presence is catalysing the sentido. The Lowburbers are sceptical but they’re walking and marching alongside these Barotics. The alliance is poignant.

There’s an acrid smell and a hint of ozone, the odour of spent pyreshotfire. I sense residues of protestatory feeling in the sentido común, but this isn’t just a demonstration. There could be a hundred thousand people out here, easily. Many of them may have tried to vote earlier before they realised some Lowburbers were set against it and what was a small rebellious core swelled into this, into upheaval and the channelling of pent-up rage. I can see that a lot of people are keeping to the sidelines. They’re watching, filming and participating by presence if not by more intense protests further ahead.

Taye’s magiary still flows through me and I catch myself more than a few times nudging people out of my way kinetically. Kehinde has to grab my arm before I push a young girl out of the way. I try to ignore the envy in his ánimo. Leonor has pocketed her pyregun, but her hand stays on the holster. She glowers at the Neo-Druids who are chanting in Ancient Celtic near the flaming wreck of a flybus.

Kehinde keeps going, weaving further and further towards the Needle. I’m not sure if he remembers the point is to blend in, not to be drawn to the movement’s provocative front, or if this is as selfless as he claims. Leonor and I follow practically in a stupor. We’re so out of place down here.

The deeper we go, the more aggressive people become. A block from the frontline, the crowd moves backwards then forwards again in heaves and retreats and surges again. Some are escaping into buildings and shop entrances and down side streets, but the base here is resistant. They push towards the advancing Guard line and scream profanities at the gold uniforms. ‘This gathering is unauthorised,’ comes a magnified Midtongue voice. ‘Return to your homes immediately. A curfew is in effect. The Grand Master has authorised force if necessary.’

Flashes of orange and a haze of ozone reveal something incongruous even in the chaos over here. There are Pyrrhics, and they're on the Lowburb side of the line. I see them joining their pyres into a wall of fire reaching near the next streetlevel above. There are cheers and screams and a rush forward. What are Pyrrhics doing here?

I feel a leathery tickle at my neck. Kehinde is picking at me with a vine. He directs his head towards a doorway to what looks like a Magonist temple. I have to move some animated youngsters back a few metres so we can get through.

The temple is deserted, but the fireballs are still rippling above the votive ponds. Leonor moves to a window next to the old wooden door and looks out with her pyregun to her chest. Kehinde collapses by the floating fountain, its water tumbling in arcs and swirls around a three-pointed candle. It's an oddly peaceful setting against the clamour outside.

'The idea was to hide in the crowd,' says Leonor. The door opens, but she sticks the pyregun in the faces of the Lowburbers trying to get in. They retreat quickly.

'It was getting too max. We're safe in here for a while,' Kehinde says. An ánimo pricks at me, thoughts and feelings just hinting at their presence, just out of reach, out there, somewhere.

'Well, I can't see Springform anywhere near here, so well done,' says Leonor. 'There are Pyrrhics though.'

'Don't you cognigraph the Magial Isle at the SIB? You should wit how the max bit facks.'

'Cognigraphing the pensado común doesn't explain Pyrrhics provoking the Guard line,' she says.

'It does if the master of their synod was just overthrown as GM.'

'You think they're trying to inflame—

in that temple

'What maxxer way to show that Niobe miscalculated—

he's down here following

vir get the fuck out of my head

get out get out get out

'Taye's outside!' My hands are gripping the ridge of the pond. The stream won't stop won't stop it's relentless he's relentless

you're

too far in here

get out get out get out

get out of my fucking head

I try to ground pull myself from the resonance

waves collide with wood and Taye is

here

he's

here

The pyregun is cocked and pointed at Taye Velox's head. He's here, in the temple. He sensed me here, sensed me sensing him, and burst in. The door clanks closed.

'That gun facks nil contra my magiary, sor,' he says to Leonor. His face is wild. Teary, dirty, a bit bloody, a sudden mirror of Kehinde.

The telepotential bridge is oscillating between us, rushing, disjunctive and nulling.

'Don't kinetick my brother and we won't have to find out how good your magiary is,' Leonor seethes. She lowers the weapon. 'Though he did throw Springform and Dovetry a hundred yards down a street. Your magiary is useful, Velox.'

He isn't listening. He's seen Kehinde, who is on his knees by the pond. 'So, you're here too? Did ye cog this was the place to bond around?'

'Your maman merged herself up in an omnifuck in the Grand Council,' Kehinde says in a broken growl. 'And why are you here? I cogged this place was too low for your golden blood.'

'It's your blood too.'

'Don't you *fucking* compare us!' he roars suddenly and spitting, pouncing from the ground until he's standing inches from Taye's face.

'That's verit,' says Taye, calmer. 'You left your golden blood behind.'

'I didn't have your golden blood in the first place. That was the whole befucked problem, *sire*.'

'This isn't the time!' I snap at them. They both look at me, as if suddenly remembering I'm here.

Taye moves from the standoff without looking at Kehinde and steps towards me. 'How do you handle all that … feeling out there?' he asks. He's still furious and he wants to hurt me. It's radiating from his ánimo, raw and unbidden, and it's in his expression.

'If I knew how to use my magiary myself, I'd tell you, Taye.' I notice I'm rubbing my hands over my arms. The thick walls block out a lot of the noise from the street, but there's enough of a rumble to make the awkwardness jarring in here. Taye is dislocated.

‘We need a novo plan,’ Kehinde says. ‘This temple won’t be empty for long.’ He looks at the statuary next to the votive ponds familiarly. I wonder if he’s dabbled with Magonism since he left the Kinetics.

‘We?’ repeats Taye, his eyes still on me. ‘I cogged you didn’t want us on the same side.’

Kehinde licks his lips, then drops his head. I can feel him trying to clam up, and Taye probably can sense it too – if he knows yet what he’s feeling and whose feelings go where. ‘Bono, I have a flat by District 2. It’s not that far from here. We might as firm bond around there. Nil Kinetic has voyed there yet.’

‘District 2? I cogged you’d live with your gen,’ says Taye.

‘Would you cred they didn’t want me in the Botanial Quarter? My magiary wasn’t firm enough. Dicted it was fake.’ A gush of tenderness and longing whips between Taye and Kehinde. They still won’t look at each other, but I see Taye’s head bow as he feels what his brother is feeling. It’s so alien to him, sensing what would otherwise be hidden or spoken only through imperfect words and gestures, and the bluntness, the rush of it, cuts him. He glances at me, saying with his soul that this is good and terrifying and wanted and shunned all at the same time. And that he still doesn’t know what he wants to do with me. He thought he was fleeing. Even Leonor is watching the brotherly gush. Kehinde is blossoming the lilies in the pond. He mutters, almost inaudibly, ‘The Guard will wit about that flat by now.’

Taye’s soul is reaching across the room for his brother, but his body is still. His magiary has caught the petal offerings from a pool behind him. They’re floating around his head like butterflies regarding a bloom. He doesn’t seem to notice. I incline my feelings into comfort and solidarity for him. His eyes twitch to me quickly enough to show he sensed it and I see his lip slip up just slightly, but the pain resurfaces. Then he looks to the door, hears again the noise behind it, feels pulled back to the horrors of the present, and agitates.

‘Why are you down here, Taye?’ I ask.

When he looks at me, his eyes are distant. ‘No one else to voy to. At least these virs have somebit to dict to the powerful. These Barotics despise Maman. Hate her. Somewise, I wanted to be with them.’

There’s a rapid series of pops outside. And a scream – not one person, but a kind of communal bellow. ‘They’re firing warning shots,’ Leonor says the fear sweeps an icy blade cuts through me nerves on fire throat choking scream up the too too much fear—

Kehinde. Gripping my shoulder. And Taye’s. Pulls us out of the feelingstream. Taye recoils from his brother’s touch. ‘Thanks,’ I manage to say.

Taye's ánimo is broiling. His soul is settling into a piercing decision. 'This is her doing,' he breathes. 'They aren't listening to her, so she wants control and order. Especially over the Barotics. They're disposable.' So that's what's pushing him: the inertia of the sensorigraph, its unspeakable implications.

'Taye, this isn't Johannesburg,' I say.

'You don't get to sense me!' he yells absurdly. 'I don't cred you.'

'What are you going to do out there? Huh? Those people are trying to show the Upperburbs that they don't care who's in charge, who just took power in secret, that the voting was powerless. It's all the same to them.'

'And how would you wit what Lowburbers cog? You're as vain as any Midburber I've ever clashed up with.'

'Virs,' says Kehinde. He gives his twin a look somewhere between defiance and longing. 'They're my people now. Fuck if your mother gets to slaughter them just because they won't keep her streets quiet on the day of her befucked enthronement. I need to be there with them.' It might be a plea. To both of us. From a man who knows the inadequacy of his birth magiary.

Taye aches at Kehinde's ardour. He commands the door to creak open. He doesn't have to ask me if I'm joining him. The decision was made in the simmering, connective space between us, even if it's reckless and wrong and unplanned and mostly driven by Taye's insatiable bend to redemption. He thinks he can stop an Upperburb atrocity this time.

'Miguel, what are you doing?' calls Leonor behind me.

Chapter 26

It's heady chaos. Collective resistance is gone. Now it's just people streaming down one side of the street, running, screaming. The feelingstream wants me to run back with them, but Taye urges me towards the Guard line. I see it: Quantic crystalline glass floating across the road to scrape the crowd back, flycars bearing down above the screen, pulses of light spraying over the glass.

Pops. Right at the edge. The glass glints. Taye forces a path to the frontline where the protesters with the most valour and recklessness are clustering. They're moving back with the Guard's advance, but throwing fireballs and percussive blasts and vines at the hovering glass and the flycars.

The Pyrrhic protesters near us see Taye's necklace and shriek in camaraderie, a fellow Upperburber in solidarity. 'Ye won't fack anybit, state scum!' one shouts. He unleashes a vicious stream of blue fire. The glass glows and cracks. His fellows join in. A stream of rippling hot air from a group of Thermics joins the barrage. The screen warps, then shatters in a blast of energy and heat that throws us back. Taye deflects shards and shrapnel from our heads.

'Those Pyrrhics are only going to make things worse!' It's Kehinde's voice. He's here, vining a path to us. 'Viz the tattoos. On their necks.' He's right. Glouw's crest: a Pegasus against flames. 'I've vizzed this fore down here. Glouw must have sent them here to provoke the protest, make it glimmer like the Society rejects the Grand Master. They just want violence.'

'They don't need to do much. There are thousands of people who are genuinely furious already,' I say.

The Guard, exposed and angry, have had enough. A singeing, white-hot shot appears out of nowhere and hits to the right. The sentido is ire and fume and from somewhere there's a tirade of pressurised air coalescing from multiple points and hitting the Guard line then people surging forward furious rumbling in the ground and sharp thorny vines erupting from tarmac I rage against the overload try to keep clear concentrate a sea of Lowburb and other Potents in rage I can't stop their rage in me pulsing through me now I feel Taye's body fight control itself as he senses it too his eyes find a moment but chaos overwhelms no idea where Leonor her ánimo disappeared in chaos Kehinde at my shoulder one moment then gone reappear seconds later some Botanials shoot vines and jagged leaves into a green mist and I don't know what I'm

supposed to be doing just too much to feel the crowd's energy unable to do anything surging forward surging forward everyone is surging forward to stream onto the street screaming and chanting the sentido on the verge of anarchy I've never been inside something so virulent there's a knife edge to the caprice—

More shots in the air. Close this time. They whip me back to focus, out of the sentido. 'Get back to your homes! Ye have been warned! This gathering is illegal!' Their flycars are bearing down on the crowd, forcing the frontline to retreat. At last, there's ground visible between the marble steps of the Needle and the Pyrrhic-led front.

'They're going to get someone killed!' Taye is shouting. His voice is hoarse. 'I have to stop this. I have to stop this.' He's delirious. I can still sense his body straining against the torrent of feelingstream that is trying to enflame and electrify him to revolution. There's something deeper happening too, some ripple of lifelong political angst that the crowd is triggering and the feelingstream is amplifying and his emotions are cascading into, carrying me into them, firing my desperation, muddying his fervour and my fear. 'I have to, I have to!'

What did we think we were doing? I've been yanked out here by a man's collapsing ego. This is chaos. The Lowburbers and the Barotics, led now by these Pyrrhic agitators, a strange inter-class meld, are taunting the Guard. This can't end well.

We're pushed forward with another wave. It's now just a crush. The chanting is blaring, 'Lowers rise! Lowers rise!' Even the Barotics are saying it.

Taye remembers, I remember, I rewit Johannesburg, trapped, the bullet flying, that sweet sweet boy the waste of it all maman orchestrating death and I'm powerless he's powerless assuage bloodlust muttering I see his lips move but chanting deafening squeezed between people carried forward … 'I need to,' he's saying … 'I need to, I need, I need you.'

His hands find mine, grip them to his face. His eyes settle. 'I need you,' he mouths. He leans and lets his forehead rest against mine. Closes his eyes. The resonance eases, calms, finds equilibrium. His ánimo softens into mine, letting himself sink into my presence, holding back nothing, taking strength from the little I have left. He's hurt by me and there's pain with Kehinde and Johannesburg is a trauma beneath it too, all mingling in a woundedness that makes him reach for me in spite of himself. 'I need you,' he says, now more forcefully. The moment, clutching and effortless, an intimacy of souls held despite explosion outside, an oasis, lingers.

His need enthrals me and dissolves me in the singularity of his cathartic winding. But this can't be. I've let myself be carried so much by this ánimo, this unchosen other life that I've chosen to embrace, this thing I can't help but need as well, but he's going too far even for me,

even for the parts of him that are now enfleshed in me. ‘Taye. If this unravels, it’s not your fault. This isn’t that Impotent flat in Johannesburg.’ Fire blasts upwards. The Pyrrhics are provoking again. Why don’t people see this? Why don’t they just leave?

Kehinde vines my attention. He’s further up. Taye turns and kineticks his way closer. Kehinde points a few yards ahead.

A Pyrrhic has broken from the line and is blasting flames at Guardsmen around him. They swarm, deflecting the fire with their shields, but this just incenses the crowd further. The other Pyrrhics scream and send their own volleys of vibrant fire. It blazes light over us. People cheer.

Barotics to the left unleash a stream of pressurised air at the Guard too now. It distorts the fire but they scramble back. Then the ground vibrates as vines punch through concrete and tar from unseen Botanials. Chunks of ice start whipping through the air in stunning arcs that smash at the Guard line.

‘What are they doing?’ Taye screams. The crowd feels the thrill of a shift in leverage and pushes forward again. I’m crushed between Kehinde and Taye and seized by the momentum.

A flycar dives for us, blinding with its headlights and forcing another retreat. The ice shots and fire and barotickry and vinework don’t stop, but now they’re random and erratic. Taye heaves another path forward. The flycar rears again. A boulder of ice ploughs straight into it. Jets of air ram from the other side. Wind ricochets from the craft down to us, causing screams and joy. The jets don’t stop. The engines roar to maintain control, but the Barotics are relentless. It’s like a hurricane, coned towards a single point. The crowd chants rhythmically in support. It’s a spell, a twisted phantom of Potent history. They want the thing downed. More ice punctures it. Fire streams.

Then the flycar’s gone. I don’t know where. The crowd is ecstatic. But the Guard now zero in on the Barotics, who are as culpable as the Lowburbers now in their eyes. Hundreds of gold suits make for them. The sentido común switches at once into panic. The rush reverses. Air pumps and whizzes around us as we’re pulled backwards. The Barotics are fighting. There are pops and whizzes and blasts and chaos. Gold helmets race in. The Pyrrhics try to join, but the Guard are on the offence now. There must be Kinetics among them because Pyrrhic bodies move straight back into the crowd in fluid lines. Kinetic waves are starting to carve the line the Guard couldn’t hold otherwise.

What was defiance is becoming horror. People are tripping and crying. There are teenagers here and elderly people and those who thought defiance was a momentary thrill, all fleeing the fire and Barotic bursts and the Guard whose reputation in these parts is horror.

But the line is messy by the Barotics. There's too much movement. Gold glints deep into the mêlée. Air is blasted at the officers but the Kinetic Guard stream waves as hard as they can, throwing bodies clear into the air. Someone rams into my torso in the mess. It's freezing. The man pushes at my shoulder to steady himself. 'Isa?' It's the Cryonic I represented weeks ago, Isa Calo. His eyes are too wild to recognise me. He screams something about freedom and runs back to the fray.

I've lost Taye and Kehinde. Impelled by forces I don't understand at this point, I pulse against the human tide until I'm at the front, at the line between the ardent of the protestors and the kinetickry heaving back at them. Everything is dark and fluid and jagged. But some protesters got past before the waves were erected. Guardsmen are scattering and clustering to clear them, but they're stubborn. They're firing everything their magiaries can. It's scrappy and pathetic and they're outmatched and the Guard are getting vicious.

The spectators are bellowing at the officers to keep off their fellows. The Barotics keep bursting air at the invisible barrier, but it just sends wind shears back at us.

Taye is watching the barrier. He wants to dismantle the kinetickry. I see it in the way he's looking upwards and the calculation in his ánimo. 'Taye, don't!' I try to yell above the screams and blasts. But he's seeing something in those protesters beyond. It's an obscene comparison, insane, but his wounded soul is churning into redemptive zeal. 'Taye, no!'

He launches upwards, messianic, soaring high above the brawl. Kehinde seizes me in a grip of terror, yet the crowd throbs in throes of adulation. A Kinetic, they have a Kinetic on their side!

'Taye!' I scream. 'Think about this!' I'm trying to find something to latch onto, some moment in the feelingstream to reach him and pull him back from this brink, but he won't let me. So much for needing me. 'Kehinde! He's going mad!'

Taye floats even closer to the seething, cracking Kinetic membrane, lifts his arms and slams kinetickry ahead of him in an almighty torrent that proclaims the power of his magial inheritance. The barrier flashes a brilliant, menacing yellow, ripples, warps and whirs with the harmonic squeal of pure magium rubbing against itself.

'Fuck this,' Kehinde yells, his voice breaking. 'He's going to obb virs killed!' He shoots a long vine upwards. It connects at Taye's wrist, but he shakes it off. Kehinde hurls another line, but Taye doesn't respond at all. Kehinde curses and runs towards him, trying over and over again to reach his flying, imperious twin with his feeble vinework. Line after line reaches up, each more desperate and flimsy and misthrown than the last. But Taye is beyond even his brother's

reach. I hurl a stream of waves to try to cancel his, but he's too powerful. All I manage is a split-second's pause in the oscillating air.

There's a sharp ripping from above. A moment of silence, voices cut, the world in suspension. Then an almighty rush.

Air rips and tears and people are thrown, we're thrown, energy spiralling in random vortices. Heat blazes. Somewhere, everywhere, I don't know. I find my feet, but people are running in all directions, knocking me over, tripping over me. I'm bleeding, somewhere.

Taye's landed. A Guardsman is running at someone. I can't see who. The Pyrrhics are making for the Guard again in a swarm. Taye's ánimo is a virulent spark. Something's wrong. Something's very, very wrong. He's deadening. He's collapsing into rage. I run, push my way through, dodge an ice chunk. He's running too, making for something deeper in the crowd. It's too dark to see what.

Then I see it. A man, a boy really, restrained by a Guardsman in a chokehold. He's pulling and flailing, firing little gusts into the air, but it's useless. People are screaming at the officer to let him go, but he's brandishing a pyregun in wild arcs. Taye only sees the boy. 'Taye, no!' He throws his hand. The officer's arms whip backwards and the boy darts towards his people, but the Guardsman pumps a massive goblet of water from his hands. It hits the boy's feet and trips him in a wet scramble. He falls again and hurls a volley of barotickry that only hits the Guardsman's shoulder. People surge to help, but the officer sprays a cannon of water in a circle around him. He's trapped. The Guardsman rears and jumps and the boy screams, stumbles back, arms flaring.

The Guardsman jerks. And fires.

The boom is thunderous even above the other noises. Everyone nearby turns, inhales in communion.

The Guardsman's body hits the tarmac. I have to push through before I can see what happened clearly. His chest is smoking, a glowing ashen point at his heart.

Taye is yards away, his hand held out towards the corpse.

It takes only seconds for the Guard to realise what's happened. They open fire.

The world flashes in a stream of lights that jets towards Taye. He throws his hands up, I throw my hands up, and waves snap in place just in time to hurl the fusillade away in a blinding flash. He collapses onto his knees.

The attention of hundreds is on this now. It can't not be. The boy's running back to the line. Another round blazes, random and chaotic and not just at Taye now and he screams and diverts

bullets in another spray of fiery beads, heat and light and cracking. There's a commotion, screams, a curdling bellow.

The boy rolls on the ground, a yard from the line. Twists to a stop. And doesn't get up.

Taye's kinetickry wasn't enough.

The Guard are stunned. But fear strikes through the sentido común as they panic en masse. They fire, this time not stopping. It's a hail, a mass of death in a blinding, singeing, cloud. I flinch my arms while running to him, running for reasons I can't fathom. He's just kneeling there in stupefaction while the world implodes and shots flare around him. His magiary reacts to my nerves and the bridge and the bound exertion of will onto wave. A bubble strikes the concrete, wraps up, entombs us beneath a shield. Kehinde made it here too. Somehow, somewhy. He crouches close. The bubble is tiny. Magial sparks sheer from the air as more bullets pile and stream at the barrier. With each collision my body seizes as the waves shudder to keep control again and again something hits and pounds I scream agony exertion I don't know how I can keep this control going chaos and terror but softens calms me a bit clarifies my thoughts clarifies gets control again so I tell Taye to focus, 'Focus on my voice, anything. Taye I need to think clearly, just for a few seconds.

Don't slip into

the

stream

of

death

another death

why again why again why again it's happened again it's my fault no no theirs

the guard always the guard

Taye focus

Kehinde is shaking us. The bubble is showering sparks and fracturing from the fusillades. I yell in agony at the effort, even though Taye is helping too now. Kehinde keeps shaking. 'Your sister!' he's saying, over and over again. 'Your sister! There!'

'What?'

He grabs my face and twists. It's Leonor. With her crystalpod held out. It's glowing. I can just about see her through the mirage. 'She's showing her badge to them!' Kehinde calls.

The firing ceases suddenly. The bubble cocoons us in silence. It's a macabre bliss.

'Cut this bubblefield!'

Taye's catatonic. I don't really know what I'm doing, so I throw my hands around. The waves tremble but don't break. 'Taye, drop the bubble! Drop it!'

'Mon frère!'

His head snaps to Kehinde. Even in the dark, his eyes are bloodshot. He looks up. Air shifts and sucks with the bubble's collapse.

Leonor is in front of us, showing her SIB badge on her crystalpod to the Guard. 'Do ye ken who that is ye've been firing at?' she hollers at them. 'Ye do not want to dict Her Supremacy why ye tried to kill her son!'

He'd be more believable as Niobe's son if he didn't look so distraught. He's seen the boy, a splayed-out form of just-live flesh. Kehinde tries to restrain him, but he pushes and runs to the body. No one else moves. The Guard are paralysed.

Taye makes to touch the boy but he stops, holds back reverently and just kneels.

Behind us, the crowd is still but tense. People are on the edges of the street by walls and doors and shopfronts. They aren't chanting or advancing or fighting. The crowding humanity for as far as I can see and hear has halted. I sense that the detente is a moment of shock and that an explosion is coming. But for now, crystalpods are in hands. And filming Taye Velox over a Barotic boy, a princeling and his synodic cousin.

Kehinde kneels at his brother's side. He weaves vines between his hands until they form a wreath. He settles it on the boy's chest, just above the embers. But the wreath disintegrates quickly. He tries again, but his hands just shake and produce nothing but twigs.

Someone steps from the crowd. She kneels herself and moves her hands slowly over the dust. It shifts, spindles and blooms into a flowering, revitalised wreath. Other Botanials came forward too, kneeling at this horrific shrine. The ground bursts with strands of green and flourishing petals. The foliage wraps underneath the boy, lifting the body up under a bed of growth. The vines cover his eyes.

I know something profound is happening. I've heard of the ritual, but I've never been around Lowburbers enough to see it or be invited to it. Now it's being live-streamed to what could be a whole city of curfewed Upperburbers and Midburbers.

Kehinde has moved away. He's one of them, even if his hair's green gloss is the only visual clue, yet he's retreating. He doesn't fit among his people.

Taye pulls away from the Botanials too and limps next to Leonor. His eyes find the body of the Guardsman. He won't get the same treatment as the boy. Taye's ánimo is closing in on itself, numbing and calcifying, exhausted. There's something else there too, if I'm sensing it right with

all the noise and the fraying of my own nerves. Profound, unutterable loneliness. Even with his estranged brother at his side and me on the other – me, his almano – he's isolated and isolating.

The lead Guardswoman, a Luminent by the shifting features, walks to Leonor with a crystalpod to her ear.

'This is Mr Velox's attorney,' Leonor says, gesturing to me. 'You also opened fire on him, which will viz superiously in court.'

The Guardswoman tips her chin at Kehinde. 'And him?' she asks.

Leonor doesn't miss a beat. 'An advisor.'

The Guardswoman nods at something on the other end of the crystalcall. 'It gleams you're veritous, Agent Vidente. Ye're expected in the Hallowed Chamber.'

Kehinde's ánimo curdles. He steps back, but I grab his arm. The connection brightens at the touch. He's terrified and exposed, but he cannot come. 'Are you sure?' I ask him.

Taye is already following the Guardswoman up the steps. Kehinde looks back at the Botanials. They've been joined by two Barotics who are screaming, pulling Botanials away until they reach the boy, sobbing in throes that pierce the air.

Kehinde's feelings are trembling between endless dislocation and an unconfessed scream that approaches but cannot find voice yet in his scarred heart. He nods. 'This is what they do,' he says. I don't need to ask him to explain. His ánimo, perhaps feeling truly familiar for the first time in my body's Taye-focused tilt, has found his brother's side to be a violence. It was gushy and thrilling to be with him, but death has followed Taye's reckless wake. His Kineticity, his Upperburb remove, is the unbreachable block.

I release the grip. Kehinde smiles and resumes the limp gait and caustic eyes. He walks into the confused crowd. The last I sense of his fading ánimo is shame at his falling into such brotherly euphoria.

Part IV

Chapter 27

The gentle whirring of the Kinetic motors pushing the lift up is incongruous. My ears crave the intense noise of the ground – the grit and humanity of it. This elegant, oak-panelled cubicle is too sterile for us. We're filthy. Taye's face is a smear of blood and tears and quantic residue. Leonor's only claim to working for the SIB is the crystalpod. She doesn't look that different from a protestor. I can only imagine what I look like.

No one's talking. I don't think any of us have begun to process what's just happened. Our eyes just keep finding things to look at. The scuff mark near the screen. Leonor's pyregun slung in its holster, a holster I didn't know she even owned. Taye's immobile necklace. The lightball, steady and healthy.

The screen chimes, 'Second streetlevel, first floor: Hallowed Chamber. Max Restricted Access.' We must look like zombies emerging onto the most storied ground in the Society, an obsidian and gleaming, magium-flecked marble atrium with fireballs roaring under the domed ceiling. It's scrubbered too, thank the Magon, so my numbed nerves struggle to register that I'm here, on a floor that 300 years ago was the apex of the Isle's skyline.

Daniel and Dovetry are waiting for us in at the centre of the atrium. He gives Taye a neck bow. 'Sire, Her Supremacy is waiting for you both in the Hallowed Chamber.'

'Both?' Taye asks. His voice crumbles.

'You and Advocate Vidente.' I hope he's remembering how I flung him into the air only an hour ago. Dovetry betrays a smirk that I return. 'Agent, the Guard General will debrief you herself.'

Leonor isn't surprised. 'Aren't you glad you finally found Taye?' she asks.

'Gleamly,' says Dovetry. She gestures for Leonor to follow her.

'I'll check Mamá, Miguel, te lo prometo. Cuidado con él, hermano,' she tells me before giving Taye a heavy look and walking with Dovetry towards a side door.

Daniel leads us towards the wooden doors at the other end of the atrium. They're astonishingly old – barred and grilled and decaying. They creak open slowly and loudly as we approach. Just as Daniel is about to enter, the doorway is filled by a woman with flaming hair and a face so known it defies itself in being in front of me. She holds her hand up to stop us. Her supercilious eyes notice Taye and her face contorts into a honeyed grin. 'Taye Rapp Velox!' she

coos in that granny-like voice of venomous kindness. ‘You’ve huffed up a superious min omnifuck down there.’

I bow deeply, as does Daniel. Taye looks dumbfounded. ‘Your Supr— Your Magnificence,’ he corrects.

Frederika Glouw’s mouth tickles around a smile. ‘Your mother hadn’t been Grand Master for an hour fore you torpedoed her reign.’

‘Your virs did bono down there,’ Taye replies crisply.

She takes the disrespectful tone with the aplomb of a viper in a chicken pen. She gives me only a cursory glance and glides away. Two other masters follow her – I think the Quantic and Luminent ones.

Inside, it’s less a Hallowed Hall than a Hallowed Room. A table of the same material as the walls, dark marble with flecks of raw magium that shine in the low light, takes up most of the space. Around the walls are dozens of refracted screens. Some are showing Impotent news coverage and what looks like satellite footage. There are maps of the Impotentate with statistics blaring and illegible diagrams crawling across. Others have shaky footage from newscasts on the protest, including a looping video of Taye in the air, forcing down the barriers, and him kneeling before the boy’s body. ‘NEW GRAND MASTER’S SON INTERVENES ON BEHALF OF LOWBURBERS, BAROTIC VICTIM UNDER GUARD VIOLENCE,’ blinks one chyron. The real Taye, standing next to me, his shoulder tapping mine, is too pathetic in comparison to the news’s deification.

At the other end, watching one of these screens, is the new Grand Master.

‘Your Supremacy,’ says Daniel. ‘The Esquire Velox and Advocate Vidente, as dicted.’ The ridiculous title he gave Taye seems fitting in this place. It probably is his rank now.

Niobe almost runs to him. Taye takes a knee, bowing before she gets to him and intoning, ‘Votre Suprématie, Maîtress Bien-Aimée, je vous sers.’

‘Mon fils,’ she says, lifting his chin with her finger. ‘Stand up, Taye.’ He rises and she clutches her son to her. Her voice fastens into ferocity. ‘You could have been killed!’ He doesn’t respond. His scarred and muddy face stares at her clean regal visage. ‘I’ll huff it up, fix everybit for you.’

‘What is there to fix, Maman?’

She looks devastated. It’s extraordinary in her, in this room, with the power she’s just attained, but it’s there. Devastation, incomprehension at her own son. ‘What do you mean? Viz

that!' She points to the news. It's jerky, taken from a crystalpod, but it shows Taye with his hand outstretched. There's a flash. A Guardsman falls. 'You killed an officer of the Societal Guard.'

'He was going to kill that boy!' Taye bellows.

'And they did anywise!' she screams back. The sound echoes menacingly in the small room. 'Your problem—' She catches herself, breathes, kineticks moisture from her eyes, restarts more calmly but with no less energy. 'Your problem, mon fils, is that you cannot leave what happened in the Impotentate alone. Now you have recreated it on my streets.'

His hand fumbles, reaching I think for me, but he stops it. 'I could not stand there without facking somebit. Undercog me, I could not, not aft what you did back then, not again. Don't worry. Your Guard tried to shoot me for trying to stop them.'

I hadn't noticed Plenipotentiary Sabrador was here. He's been standing in near shadow this whole time in the corner. His eyes are latched onto me.

'But I will fix it, mon fils, je te le promets.' She strokes his cheek. I can't tell if it's ferocious or maternal. Or both. She drops her hand and sighs heavily. 'I just dicted the Grand Council that you were acting as a concerned private citizen to Guard overreach—'

'Bono, that's verit,' he says.

'—and that this was in keeping with the new politics of my reign. You stood up for Lowburbers and my old synod in the face of Upperburb aggression.'

'Upperburb aggression that *you* ordered. Again. You can't dosh up to the truth.'

'The truth?' she repeats, her voice crackling over tears. 'The truth is that you met your *brother*.' The word escapes her in a hideous, shaking breath. She looks at the ceiling for a moment and stamps her foot. 'For reasons I still need to discover.' She looks at me for the first time, not murderously but with a passionate force that makes me step back to the wall. 'The truth is you then melted down psychologically, cogged you'd get merged up with an illegal protest, one that your mother was specifically trying to clear, and then, live in front of the max Magial Isle, you acted recklessly against the Guard's legitimate attempts to carry out my orders, in the process taking the life of an innocent, hardworking Aquial Guardsman with a family! You!' She shakes her fist before him. 'You undermined me within minutes of taking the Hallowed Throne! And where exactly is that brother of yours?'

'Dict his name.'

She twists and spasms. He's breaking but motionless. She kineticks a chair out with such force I think she might throw it at him, but she collapses into it, props an elbow on the table,

holds her mouth in her hand and looks at Sabrador as if he could divine something she isn't seeing. She closes her eyes. Sniffs. Shakes.

Taye's chin is trembling. Sabrador flicks his hand. It's so slight I'm not sure I see it, but he does it again, pointing to Taye. I move slowly, not sure if I'm allowed in this familial rupture, and place one arm around his back, gripping his arm with the other. He flinches but he clutches the hand on his arm and squeezes.

Taye takes a breath like he's been drowning. 'He's grown,' he whispers. Niobe turns, her eyes red and streaming. 'He's …' He breathes again. 'He's so different, Maman.' She nods. 'He tried to stop me, you wit. He tried. I didn't wit why he'd try. But.' He exhales slowly. 'You should have vizzed when he tried to fack somebit, some wreath for that – that boy. He couldn't. These Botanials came and he just moved away from them. He doesn't fit there.'

'I vizzed the befucked footage. Fucking live, in front of the whole Grand Council,' she says tiredly, standing up again and turning to the screens.

He clasps my hand again. 'If you are going to rule like you've been dicting since you took over that caucus, bringing some more fairness to the Society, breaking down synodic barriers – if you want to fack all that, you have to start with Kehinde, Maman. *You* pushed him away. You wit that. You and Papa both. He didn't just voy off for nil reason.'

She strokes the back of a chair. Her face is raw. 'Too much time has passed,' she says.

'No it—'

'It has,' she says, raising her voice. 'If he wants to be back in this family, all he needs to do is voy up here himself.'

'And be a good Kinetic, verit?'

'That was never what we dicted!'

'Then what was the standard, Maman? How could he be what he wasn't for you? You – any time he botanicked somebit you – you hated it, hated him. Of all people, *you* should have wist what it was like! Growing up in a family when you have a different magiary to everyone else? You ken that life! The only difference is your magiary was max and fucking prestigious and you could rise! He could only sink!'

This feels like an argument that was never had and has been coming for years. It's spiralling into unplanned scars and unsaid griefs.

'When will you admit that what ye did went contra everybit you've preached?' screams Taye. 'Everybit! At least Glouw doesn't hide her prejudice. You glimmer it up, dict one bit, and

fack another. Those Barotics down there are our kin! They obbed up protesting contra *you*, your power, your rejection. You're a twisted thing!'

'Because politics is hard,' she says, calmly, slowly, perhaps defeatedly. She believes it. 'This Society was founded by hubris. Those white Potents who wist oppression – veritly, they did – cogged they had the right and mission to assume that every Potent on the whole planet had to be saved by them, that the same oppression lurked over every nation. They couldn't viz the blood they were shedding on the way. They didn't want to viz their paternalism, their prejudices, their assumptions about Potents from races and peoples different from them. Those systems are in the foundations and fabric and … befucked brickwork of this island, Taye. I cannot tear it down without being careful and deliberate and slow.'

His breathing has eased. His ánimo is blind but I know him too completely. He's closing off from her. She's weaving truths into delirium.

She continues, 'I just took power on a whim. Just when I vizzed the opening. Now I have to arrange a new election for the whole Subcouncil because the Lowburbers and the Barotics cogged disrupting the election was the best way to send their message. Even then, I won't have a majority on the Subcouncil, I'm sure, so this is tenuous, Taye. And I'm one vote away from losing power on the Grand Council. One of them can flip at any point. Glouw will fack everybit she can to topple me. I'm not blind! Even those Lowburbers wit, in their core, that a woman who vizzes like me won't be tolerated up here for long. They wit these … *elites*' – a lifetime of loathing skews her tone – 'will drop me like they'll drop them. All I've ever tried to do is protect you and to protect Kehinde. You don't undercog what it's like trying to win favour with these people.'

Taye replies slowly, 'So you pushed him away because you'd lose power if he wasn't a perfect Kinetic?'

'I'll have to spend enough political capital protecting you from prosecution for murder, mon fils. Kehinde chose his path outside of my mission. Years ago.' She stares at our clasping hands. She might even smile genuinely at it, but it's hard to tell with her.

Taye's face is impassive. A Rubicon has been crossed between mother and son. Taye is done. But he is also bound.

'Now,' Niobe says in her best attempt at a business-as-usual tone. 'Advocate Vidente, you will need to defend Taye at trial. I can't stop the charges. Glouw will make sure of it. What I can do is obb the people on his side so the High Tribunal – should we appeal that high up, which we

must – will have to exonerate him. It will happen. I will ensure it. But you will have to play your part.'

'I was at the scene, Your Supremacy. It's a conflict of interest,' I say.

'Your face is being broadcast too, you wit. Justice is politics too. It's all a max glamourshow.' She looks at Sabrador. 'Now, we need to solve all these crises. Daniel, take them to the Grand Mastery. Miguel should have a room there for now.'

She gives Taye one more look, somewhere between pleading and defeat, and leaves without another word.

'Your role in the trial is crucial to our synod's interests,' Buscador says, still in the shadows.

He turns to leave, but I say, 'Magnicencia, I have a question. If I may?'

He reads me in spite of the scrubbers. 'Why would I support her? Because the Society is creaking and decaying. I need to make sure our synod is best placed when the collapse comes.' He leaves with nods to me and Taye.

'You can stop cradling him now,' Daniel says. I release Taye. His fingers linger in mine for moment longer, which Taye makes sure Daniel sees.

'You could at least give the pretence of asking me if I agree to any of this,' I say.

Daniel steps to the side to let us through the doors. 'If you didn't agree, would you fondle him like that?'

Chapter 28

The room they've given me is a palace. Grecian columns, tapestried walls, marble finishes, gold everywhere I look. Niobe is right that the Society's founders had assumptions about power and luxury, and the aesthetics attached to it. But it's lifeless.

It's the first time I've been able to pause and breathe and try to reckon with the last hours, the last days really, but I can't. My ánimo is dry. I find myself staring for ages out the window at the city beneath – and it is beneath me from this vantage point, all of it, a stretch of Upperburb skyscrapers beneath the Bubblefield, the Indian Ocean just visible in the distance. I can see the island is just that. It's cruel how the City is so intense and immediate in the Midburbs. There are buildings on top of buildings above and buildings beneath buildings below. Streets lead to streets, the sky is too far to notice most of the time, the ground is avoided and the ocean is conceptual but not confronted. It's engineered narrowness.

My crystalpod was waiting for me on the gauche writing desk. I don't know where I'd left it – probably during the scuffle outside the Centro – or how they got it here or if this gesture is supposed to convey a sense of freedom, even though so little about this feels within my control. There were pings from Leonor:

Mamá's safe. With her now. Says Buscador sees the world as she does. Not sure what that means or if we should be worried

Still has issues with me

Barrio's tense

They didn't fire me

They said you'll stay there

Be careful hermano

Isabel had chimed a few times. I don't know how even to begin with her. She might not even have seen me at the Centro. And that was only a few hours ago. How has the world practically tilted off its axis in such a short time? Everything is different. Seems different at least. I chime her.

'Miguel!' her voice screams from the crystalpod. 'What the *fuck*?'

'Sorry, presenciada, things have been – I don't even know how to describe them.'

She's quiet for a moment, then she groans. 'He's overwhelmed your ánimo, hasn't he?'

I watch the first signs of sunlight glint off the Needle in the distance. ‘I know you wanted us to be intimañeros again. Maybe we should.’

‘Leonor told me you’re staying with the new Grand Master.’

‘Yeah, it seems I’ve been coopted in this. Again,’ I say.

‘I should be thrilled she got the Grand Council to elect her. It’s what I wanted, what a lot of us wanted, but somehow this feels wrong. It was too quick. Too clandestine.’

‘Look, I’ll find some time to come and see you. I should.’

Her voice is light when she replies, ‘I think you should think carefully about what you’re doing up there. They’re calling Taye the Champion of the Lowburbs.’

‘That’s Niobe’s spin,’ I say. ‘Taye wasn’t championing any Lowburbers.’

‘Does she realise the boy was from the same synod she was born into?’

There’s something soothing in talking about politics with her again. It’s a glint of our conexión before – well, before Taye, when presencia worked. Yet I can tell, even without sensing her ánimo across the crystalcall, her holding back. I could tell her about Kehinde, but I’m finding myself juggling overlapping loyalties now. Even he seems to get the benefit of my confidentiality. Moving back to intimañía with her is far off. ‘Yes, Isabel, she does realise. I just—’

‘You have an almano now,’ she interrupts. ‘I’m Sensorial, Miguel. I do understand.’ She doesn’t, though. ‘When – if you’re able to see your mother and your sister in the Barrio, we’ll chat, alright?’

There’s a knock at the door. ‘Alright, presenciada.’ The word feels threadbare now. Presence in each other’s lives is the opposite of what we can achieve. I feel like I’m discarding her willingly, replacing her with more compromised conexiones. I end the call and say, ‘Come in, Taye.’

He enters slowly, almost sheepishly. He’s wearing the plainest clothes I’ve seen him in. Only the necklace, the obligatory necklace, hints of his status. The Mediciants have healed the scars on his face. ‘Esquire,’ I try.

He manages a chortle. ‘Don’t dict me that, ever,’ he says. He’s been smoking or drinking something like dullsage – his ánimo is steady, albeit tender. I’m still surprised at how my body accommodates his feelingstream. It’s responsive to the smallest moves of his emotionalia. It beats with his heart and nerves with his nerves. He’s trying to run away from the shock and hints of trauma just triggered and too unwieldy to begin to process and confront and encompass. My body knows how to embody his life. I don’t know anymore if it remembers how to embody my

own. Taye has changed me, physically altered me, and the heaviness that pulls at me will not leave soon, because my body is carrying his griefs too now, traumatised and altered by his own demons. Almost as if I had kineticked that bullet.

He sits at the foot of the bed and plays with his thumb. I sense his need for me, so I sit next to him. His body touches mine instinctively, little fluctuations of contact. He notices it, feels the incorrectness of it, notices the shame, ignores it. 'You viz now why I don't know how to dict up with people,' he says.

'Your mother is max,' I say, attempting Hightongue.

His head is still bowed. 'I know you sense everybit I'm about to dict, but I veritly need to dict it. It's important that I dict it out loud. Firm? I need you to wit why I was angry with you. I wit it didn't make sense.' I nod. His unease with vulnerability amuses him and irks him. 'When I vizzed you kenned Kehinde, it tore me apart. I didn't wit why.' He allows the tenderness of the moment to ripple between us. 'You have obbed closer to me than anyone in my life, my max life, Miguel. My parents tried, gleamly, but they're too befucked. Kehinde was always elusive because he had to be, so there was nil chance with him. Miranda Lightly only wanted my status. And I didn't want friends because they didn't want me. Women want my body and blood, not my soul. Everyone wants the Taye that my mother constructed for them, the charismatic vir, the smiling dazzler, the powerful Kinetic, the dutiful heir. But then you obbed up. And I drugged you into sensing me.'

'Drugged me isn't the right way of putting it.'

'It is though.' He leans backwards, tilting his head to me in a Kehinde-like way. 'I didn't want to drug you – that wasn't the plan at all – but I did. I *did*. In minutes you vizzed through me and it was terrifying. But it was also ….' The air sizzles a gushy intimacy. 'It was also so, so firm, so good. And I wanted to viz you more so I could feel that feeling again, you wit? Feeling seen. And feeling like someone actually liked what they vizzed. Made me feel … I don't wit, safe?'

The words are casting language onto the feelings to contain them and categorise them. Sentients wouldn't bother, but the Kinetic in him needs to try.

'It meant that I credded you,' he continues. 'Fratelle, I credded you with the deepest parts of myself, parts you sensed whether I wanted or not. That sensorigraph was max exposure, holding nobit back. You vizzed everybit. You even vizzed what I'd missed. I was befucked from that. And I cogged we could dict up like you promised we could. So, when I vizzed Kehinde and wist you'd hid somebit from me, I just couldn't huff it all together. You vizzed everybit of me,

but the reverse wasn't veritous. You were hiding kenning him while you plundered my soul.' He wants to wipe the wetness out of his eyes, but it won't hide the scars he's letting me feel. 'You should have dicted me, fra. I still can't cred you didn't. And you wit, vizzing Kehinde was a firm thing ultimately. Verit, it was. I'm glad I vizzed him. I needed to viz him. But I don't wit what to do with the hurt. I hate I'm hurt by you. I don't even wit why I hate that. I hardly ken you. I should be happy to hate you. But I want to get rid of it.'

He leans forward again, holding his head limp over his knees. His ánimo is twisting through pain and shame in rippling feelingstreams that clash and coalesce in my nerves.

'That bridge omnifuckery didn't help,' he says. 'I had to viz you too. Feel you. How could I hate someone I kenned so max? And now I wit why you care so easily. I'm sure I'm the last gen of person you'd want to be so bonded to. If what you sense around me is even a min fraction of what I got whiffs of while the bridge exteria was happening, I don't know how you handle it.' His ánimo is resisting the unsaid thing, but he's going there. 'So, all that makes sense to you, verit?'

'Completely,' I reply.

'So why then do I find myself … craving you?' He manages to look at me. It's an oblique turn, but it's contact. 'It's not the craving that Kinetics cog of. It's somebit else.' His hand finds mine, fingers interlocking. 'Why does this feel so firm? Why do I want you around?'

His ánimo arcs into suggestion and flinches, retreating into whorls of regret.

'And one more bit,' he says. 'Even with the hurt, I ken you too max not to care about you, to love you even. Would you … would you care about me … would you *love* me if the feelingstream stopped? If you never sensed me again?' Kehinde was right. He is selfish. He relates for his own sake. It's all about him. Or is this his way of opening and expressing? Can I even seek equilibrium?

Our hands are still twined together. His thumb is rubbing mine in gentle lifts. He wants to surrender into the inexplicable parts of himself, but he keeps just on the edge, looking over but not ready to plunge.

I say, 'To a Sensorial, especially a Sentient, all conexiones are knowing someone in ways that non-Sensorials can't, so I don't know if I would love you if you hadn't run into me that day and the seersage in your blood hadn't made me sense you so strongly. I just don't know, Taye. Your ánimo overwhelmed my own that day. I sense it now more than I've sensed anyone's. And I don't know where you start and where I stop. I don't even know if I'm myself around you. I

can't trust what I feel because I don't know if I feel anything truly my own anymore. I'm just passive. I might get lost in you.' I've uttered my own exposure, tested if he'll nurture it.

He considers me for a long, long time. We breathe into the silence.

'We aren't in control of any of this, are we?' he asks eventually, his voice hoarse. 'Don't we get to fack somebit, to have some will?'

He's found the nub of the worries that have circled near my consciousness for weeks. 'I think my mother would say that we always have will, even to deny what we can't control.'

'That's dark, fra.'

'But it's very Sensorial. Maybe that's why we spend so much of our lives drinking inhibidor, so we can pretend we have some control.'

'Kinetics like being in control.'

'I've noticed.'

He snorts. 'Maybe the will is in choosing what to do with the exteria that are beyond our control. So. Is almanistad the right word for this conexión?'

'I think so,' I reply. 'It's funny. I've read about almanistad, heard about it, seen it in others.'

'It's not that consuming one?'

'Consumidad?' I sigh too quickly. 'Maybe it's that too. At times it is. But if we're honest, what your heart wants is almanistad. The partner of your soul. Someone who knows your soul and lets you see his. I didn't know I wanted that too.'

He's not sure. There's something too imposing about this. He looks at our hands, still bound, and the shame resurfaces. 'Kinetics will assume this is sexual. And deviant,' he says. 'You wit that, verit? They will not approve of two men being like this. This needs to be hidden.'

'Are you sure that's what you want?'

He shakes his head slowly. 'You're assuming Sensorials are the end point of progress, that your ways are enlightened. Are they, though? Ye are that way because ye feel and wit in ways the rest of us don't. I don't wit, fra, I veritly don't. I want this almanistad even though I don't. Viz me using Sensorial lingo.' He laughs, heartily and freely.

'We don't have to use the Sensorial lingo. Your culture has its own words.' He's right. He's embracing something that for him and his world is extreme and scary and filthy. His world gets to determine the parameters between us. Or I'm letting it.

His ánimo is orbiting guilt and gloom. There is so much complicity in him that he can't understand. 'I wonder which of us is more trapped in all this … I don't know … politics and power?'

His head ends up on my shoulder. He curls into me, softening until I'm holding him. He shuns it, hates it, but all he wants right now is to be held, to be safe even with me, in spite of the imperfection of it all and the pain that threatens to overcome him. From the deaths that mount around him and because of him. That feelingstream is muck in my soul, but I hold it for him, hating that I'm doing it, loving it too, cherishing it. I have had agency. I've chosen this now.

So, we stay like this for hours, me holding him, our ánimos harmonising and clarifying and thrumming together again. Words come at times and die for long stretches. Leonor is correct. His choices are narrow, mine are even narrower, but we've chosen, at least for now, a communion.

Chapter 29

Daniel said this floor is off limits to the press. They're trying though. The Criminal Court is two floors below and journalists have been leaning over the balcony to see me or Taye. I stuck my torso over the railing for a few seconds and they swarmed. Every now and then one calls, 'Mr Vidente? How does your client respond to the Pyrrhic Synod's charges? Come on, just a statement!'

I keep fiddling with the tassels on my gown. It doesn't fit because I didn't earn this rank and I shouldn't be arguing in a case in which I am a witness and a possible conspirator and I definitely, affirmatively should not be wearing the Kinetic crest on my lapel, even if Sabrador insisted on the Sensorial emblem appearing beneath it too. The law used to be a refuge, an oasis of logic and impassion, but now it's the mud I have to get through.

Mamá said she'd be in court today, 'observing for academic reasons the abuse of justice'. The real reason sings from her ánimo. She wants to be in the same room as Niobe. They haven't spoken. Their past keeps creeping up on them and Niobe isn't going to be the one to make contact, so Mamá wants to come and sit in nearly the same row and demonstrate that she's aware of Niobe's games. She might bring Valora. They're preciamigas now, apparently. She hints at a conexión she and Niobe shared years ago. I'm not sure rekindling it is in any of our interests, if Niobe has any desire for it, or if she's just finding an avenue for new activism through court appearances and signalled seating. What I hope she's doing is enmeshing herself in case Leonor and I need an escape hatch. Mamá is scheming. She's spending time with Sabrador these days too. I don't know if that's a positive sign. I can't shake the feeling that I'm being used and loved in grotesque tandem. Leonor at least speaks plainly, but she and I are stuck in similar layers of complicity with the new regime, and I'm sure Mamá doesn't like the alliance it creates between her children. She can console herself in her padralterías, I suppose.

Guard sweep across the hall behind me, heralding Niobe's arrival. The size of the entourage is enough to impress passersby of the power of its principal, but she's dressed in a Midburb outfit, a subdued professional suit without the accoutrements of the Upperburb synods. She's even forgone the necklace, though she's permitted the Society emblem on her lapel, just in case someone mistakes the Grand Master of the Society of the Potent for a Midburb technocrat. The

press downstairs will feed on this sartorial stagecraft, the Barotic homage she's suddenly decided to make after decades of neglect.

Daniel tells her she has two minutes and she nods at him before coming to me. 'Your Supremacy,' I say, giving a bow of the appropriate depth.

'Advocate,' she replies. She flicks her hand at the Guard to make them step back a few paces and gestures me to a quiet corner near a large painting of Euro-Potents preaching the Society's graces to people meant to look exotic. 'Taye dicts that ye've decided ye're almanos now.'

'If we were Sensorials, that would be the term, Ma'am. I don't know if it means the same thing to a Kinetic,' I say.

She studies the painting. I can't tell if she's impressed or repulsed. Her personal scrubber remains on, naturally. 'I can't deny he cares for you,' she says. She pauses at a depiction of a girl in the scene's corner. She's alone and preoccupied with freezing a bucket of water. The painter has made her the lone dissenter of the proselytising. 'He says there's nil sex.'

Discussing sex with the Grand Master, with her son the subject of the sex, should be mortifying, but I'm numbing to Kinetic prejudices. I'm spending too much time in these circles. 'There's no sex, I promise. You'd call it a friendship,' I say.

'I'd call it incomprehensible, but here we are.' She's taken to the Hallowed Throne with a propitious sense of self-possession. Power hums from her. Yet, around me recently, she has shown slight cracks in the imperial framing. They're moments of humanity, flawed and capricious, but they're human nonetheless. I'm given the impression that to see Niobe Velox, even for a moment, in a shimmer of her unmasked self is a token of trust – or of entanglement. Right now, the break from the persona is a smidgeon of distaste at me. It betrays her politics, but Taye shattered that delusion two weeks ago in the Hallowed Hall. 'I will permit this almanistad, so long as it serves Taye. You are now part of my familiarity, as ye Sensorials would dict it. You may not cred this, but I may even want Taye to marry outside of the synod. The Lightlys gleamly would do, but Taye won't have her. He's already the Champion of the Lowburbs, as they're dicting it, so we might as well allow the possibility of … somebit. However, you must wit, Miguel, that he must marry a woman. I cannot carry my synod's support if I break too many barriers too quickly.'

I can't tell if this is a threat or typical non-Sensorial ignorance or just her way of telling me she trusts me with Taye's heart. I've learned that things with her are parsed through the

parameters of performance and posturing, and the kernels in them are only meant to be doubtfully inferred.

Again, there is that feeling that I'm being used. She doesn't hide it. She's wound me in her orbit and subordinated me to her will and power plays. She did it with Leonor too. Sabrador is involved obliquely. Mamá is counter-weaving. 'I understand, Your Supremacy,' I say.

Daniel is trying to get her attention, but she swats him away. 'You cog I'm heartless, don't you?' She looks out over the nearby banister at the dozens and dozens of balconies beneath. There's a sense of divine right in the way she takes in this building. The press caterwauls at her. 'You have been given access to sides of my family that few have. You have an access to Taye that even I don't have. I credded your mother like that once. The Magon has confounded me with how often she and her family keep obbing up in my life.' She's tapping the fingers of both hands together, contemplating me. She pulls back the sleeve from her right wrist, revealing a chain of yellowish crystals. A little screen refracts off one.

Daniel almost runs to her. 'Your Supremacy, you shouldn't!'

'Fuck off for once, Daniel, veritly,' she snaps. His mouth drops open. She shoos him like an errant child.

She taps the screen. For the first time, the ánimo of Niobe Velox whips at my senses. It's deep, a slow, hyper-controlled ruffle. So much of it is too unfamiliar for my body, a foreign language spinning in only snatches of recognisable sounds in otherwise unintelligible noise. Nonetheless, there is an undercurrent of Taye there. It's so very Taye. I know its contours and its motions. It's older and stabler, though not colder, not as charged as Kehinde's, but that substrate I do sense. She yearns and feels like her sons do. She craves connection like them too. She pushes pain deep in the crevices of her nightmares. And she hides as easily. But it's all retained and managed, a feelingstream steady and unroilable.

She's finding my face amusing. 'Now, do you still cog I'm heartless?' she asks. I don't think she knows how this works. I can't sense it directly. If anything, I sense a vulnerability wrapped in a need to control herself and everyone around her. That might be a misinterpretation shaded by interactions with her, but heartfulness is a hard emotion to tease out of this ánimo.

She taps her wrist again and the feelingstream vanishes. 'I'll be vizzing you in the courtroom. Rewit that we need to obb this case to the High Tribunal on appeal, so this trial is performance. All we need is for the public to viz Taye as the Champion of the Lowburbs, just as they want him to be. And you are the tireless defender from the Midburbs. Just as I was once. It's pan-synodic solidarity. From this basis, we can build a very different Society.'

‘Does that include Kehinde?’

Her face is taut. I chanced the insubordinate question, but she doesn’t snap. She simply observes me. ‘His version of events isn’t as veritous as it sounds, Miguel.’ Her voice flutters. ‘That boy alwise had a flair for narratives that warped truths into glamourshows of self-wounding. Taye couldn’t viz it. Kehinde was my viper, but you already wit that, verit? You sensed him gleamly.’

She’s spinning her narratives. They may be webbed around truths. Perhaps she and Kehinde are more alike than anyone else in the Velox dynasty: both are outsiders to their natal worlds and suspects in their chosen ones. Her grand mastery so far has been a tenuous drip-feed of mild reforms that amount to little change. Perhaps that is where she and her son diverge, the satisfaction with the incremental.

She’s pleased with her answer and glides away with Daniel offended behind her and her security around her.

Crystalpods flash at us and journalists scream questions as we approach the courtroom doors. Taye’s mask is immaculate. He smiles that beneficent smile, waves to every Midburb- and Lowburb looking Potent around and pats his chest as if overwhelmed by the adulation. Just before the entry, someone has refracted a massive screen with a still from that night. It’s a stylised shot, black and white, of Taye kneeling before the Barotic boy, his face shattering in what was genuine turmoil. ‘CHAMPION OF THE LOWBURBS / SON OF BAROTICS’ is flashing below. Taye sees it and gives the young Barotics who are cheering beneath it a humbled bow. The courtroom is scrubbered, but I know that the appellation unsettles him.

I wait for him to pass into the chamber, straighten the stupid jacket again, and prepare for a case that is beyond my expertise, legal and political and moral. My feet carry me forward like they know already that I am bound to the momentum here.

I see Mamá in her strategically chosen seat behind the defence bench. Leonor is there too, her SIB brooch not on today. The sight of them makes me ache somehow for Isabel. She’d want to see this, although she’d despise it too. Those three women have angled differently in the fallout from Taye’s eruption in my life.

Taye takes his seat next to me and lets slip a moment of fear across that noble face. I forget sometimes that he’s as much a pawn and a glib practitioner in this parlour game as I am.

I pat his knee, allow myself a second to revel in his presence and tap my crystalpod open to prepare for the drama ahead.

Epilogue

Kehinde Newgreen

Business has been min since the protests, even with these Midburb clients and the few Upperburbers who come down here to look class-conscious, at least among the people they're drifty dicting up with. They don't want to viz the chaos just streetlevels downwise. Makes sense. Who wouldn't want to glimmer that they can still have their double wakesage brews, spiked with thrillance because it's on trend, voying to their normal high-paying jobs and normal, cozy homes? I ken these people. They're exactly the types to dict about the Champion of the Lowburbs as if he's a genuine saviour with Midburb blood in his veins, proof that their new Grand Master raises her family with the very values she professes.

The dissonance is gleamly everywhere. While I brew a wakesage mix for a bonoform Aquial vir, he dicts his friend, 'They don't know what's good for them, honestly. Velox is the best thing that's happened to them. Now they're fucking around with this burbist shit like she's some enemy just because she worked her way into the Kinetic Synod, which was her right. They hate aspiration.' When I place his cup fore him, his eyes viz my hairline. His 'thanks' is more polite than earlier. He cogs being nice to a Botanial makes him anti-burbist, the fucker. But then his eyes harden with lust. Different kind of fucker, then. 'Add a shot of thrillance to that, won't you?' His brows flicker in a flirt.

Deciding that fucking an Aquial tonight would be too damp, I add the tincture slowly and gleam like I haven't undercogged his hints. He returns sliply to his friend.

'Triple wakesage brew, straight,' the next client dicts. 'And make it without the class warfare, fratelle.'

My hand is already at on the brewer when I recognise the voice and viz up. And smile brokenly. 'Firm necklace.' Miguel Vidente draws his jacket tighter to conceal the gold chain. Shouldn't it be spinning? 'Triple shot? You verit? It'll fuck you exteriously.'

He nods. His eyes are hazy. I rewit that look: it means he's sensing me. He purses his lips and tries to distract himself by vizzing the news on the brewery's crystalslab. There's footage of the trial. It's always on these days.

I lower my voice. ‘You wit, the customers here cog themselves the types to recognise the Champion’s lawyer. They can’t viz past their own noses.’ When I hand him the small cup of max toxic brew, I nod to the staff door behind me and ask a colleague to cover my break.

Outside is a narrow side street. Guard sirens echo from below, which has become so commonplace now it’s veritly just background noise. The Midburbs are so calm and polite.

‘Sip slowly, fra,’ I dict him, pointing to his steaming cup. He takes a sip with more practice than I cogged. I sit on a crate by the wall. He’s awkward, hovering. Why doesn’t his magiary make this easier for him? ‘How’s life as a Velox?’ I ask.

‘I wanted to see you before now, weeks ago,’ he dicts. ‘I couldn’t get out until this morning. The trial has been … too much.’

‘I don’t need your sympathy, you wit. We don’t veritly ken each other.’ That makes him smile, but he hides it sliply. I take a swig of my wakesage and sigh into the quickening of my bloodstream.

‘She thinks she’s helping you. Somehow.’

So, he wants to dict about Maman. ‘Yeah, I wit. This job vizzed up out of nowhere. Gleamly she’s capable of guilt.’

‘Taye confronted her about you.’

His earnestness is exterious. ‘How is he? The press makes him gleam like a god. It’s befucked.’

Miguel sits on the crate next to me. I cog for a moment if he senses the sensuality of his proximity. ‘What happened down there that night, he has to relive it in court. But the trial is all about him killing that Guardsman, not the Barotic boy he was trying to save.’

‘Calum.’

Miguel acknowledges the name morosely. ‘Taye is not alright. He wants absolution. And it’s not available. So, he’s suffocating and Niobe is making it all a show for her benefit.’

‘And have ye two decided what ye are to each other yet?’

‘I came here to see how you’re doing, not to give you all the prurient details you want.’

‘Prurient?’ I giggle.

He laughs too, but catches himself again. Does he sense my suspicion? ‘We’re almanos most of the time.’

I wit he senses the undertone to my next question. ‘Do you want to be his? His soul? I mean, I undercog that you had no choice in how much of his ánimo got dumped into you. Fuck,

did you even choose to care about him as much as you do? Or do you love him, if that's the word you want? Do you want this?'

He swirls the remainder of his wakesage brew, watching it as if the answer would rise with the steam. 'I love him. I do. Desperately, emphatically, deliriously. I know every part of him. I've been him. I've held his soul in my body and heart and mind. You can't not love someone who has reached so deeply.'

'Do you want more?'

'More than his whole soul?' My responding 'mm-hmm' ripples with suggestion. He vizzes it, of course. 'No,' he dicts. 'No, I don't.'

I nudge his shoulder with mine. 'I undercog you, Miguel. You don't have to justify anybit.'

'Maybe.' His body stiffens. 'Do you want to go back to the family?'

I squint. 'Did you obb here for an absolution of your own?'

His eyes are distant. He's sensing. I don't wit if I'm unsettled or thrilled by it. 'I came here because I can't forget the sensation of your ánimo that night, when you chose not to come with us into the Needle.'

I can't undercog what he wants. Does he even wit himself? 'Blood isn't a prerequisite for love. I can't be around people who can't accept what I am. So, no, I won't voy back to that family,' I dict.

He stares at the ground. 'I have proximity to power now. I need to do something with it, make it count.'

'Miguel,' I dict, 'do you wit why Niobe Velox is so dangerous? It isn't because she's ruling with the same impunity towards the Lowburbs as the predecessor she despised. It isn't because she pretends to be serving them. It isn't even because she's cruel and manipulative and tyrannical to her own family.' Miguel vizzes me as if I'm missing somebit. 'It's because she's all of that, but she also loves. She cares overmax. That's what makes her so dangerous. It's a toxic combination.'

He's quiet for a max time, spinning the cup in his hands. 'I thought you'd hate me for becoming one of them.'

'It's exterious you care whether I hate you or not.'

His eyes flash. 'What are you going to do?'

'Serve sage to the bourgeoisie and let Descender's writing flourish beneath their arrogance,' I dict. 'This place, all these firm areas, they're sitting above the people who built the

City. It's all going to fall. Are you veritly going to be with the House of Velox when that happens?'

'I have to make the best of the trap I'm in,' he dicts.

For a vir who vizzes everybit in others, he's blind to himself. The side of his body has found mine once more. His arm and shoulder brush against me, making connection and then lifting. 'You have to stay with Taye, you mean.' He droops. 'Because you don't wit how not to.' He drains the cup and throws it awkwardly into a nearby dumpster. 'No more kinetickry?'

'The telepotential bridge comes and goes. Sorry.'

'Sorry that it comes and goes?'

'No.' He's trying to sound serious. 'No, it isn't right that I can just use kinetickry, even though I have no right to it. That whole time I was channelling his magiary in front of you, I know what it did to you.'

'I don't wish I was Kinetic. Don't be sorry.'

He hops off the crate and shakes a bit. That heavy dose of wakesage brew will hit him in a few minutes. He holds out his hand to help me down. I don't obb it immediately. I jump off, more graciously given the practice I've had with wakesage, but I do take the hand. He squeezes and bites his lip. 'You should learn to speak Midtongue now,' he dicts.

'I need to speak maxxer Lowtongue first.'

He vizzes at our hands. I cog he senses more clearly with physical contact. He doesn't have to ask, but he seems compelled to. 'Can I choose to—'

I pull him gently until our faces are breaths apart. He's hesitant, searching, questioning. I let my body hover closer to his and graze his skin. We linger for a max while. He craves. I viz it in his eyes, the headiness of expectation, the doubting, the conflict. He bows his head in a single rush, but stops, checking again. 'Fucking Magon, Miguel,' I dict. I press his hips, softly, slowly, until he's against the wall, curl a half-smile, breathe against his skin. When his lips meet mine, they're hungry and clumsy, but he pulls back and vizzes at me like I'm supposed to be repulsed. I respond slowly, teasing his patience until I merge up more vigorously, finding his body easing into my hold but asserting itself in turn, echoing and leading, searching at my waist amateurishly. I make him fumble for min seconds fore sliding my hand under his belt. He grips me more firmly in thrill, but he retreats from the frenzy. His head rests on my chest and he collapses into my hold.

We voy on like this, an exterious vizzance of virs leaning against each other and a side street wall, the lust dissolved into cradling. His voice is soft and croaking. ‘He never realised I just wanted to be held too. I’ve been doing all the holding.’

‘So did you obb here for this?’

‘I didn’t know why I came.’

‘He’ll never give you this,’ I dict into his shoulder. ‘You wit that, verit?’ This isn’t like the other virs, the ones here or below. He doesn’t take and flee but settles into this raw, spontaneous connection of two virs. He’s gentle and responsive.

‘He gives it in his own way,’ he dicts. His voice is vibrating through my chest. ‘What you can give is different.’

‘You mean I can give you more?’

‘Different, not more.’

‘Bono, as much as I hate the vir, I’m drifty you’re there for him.’

He unfurls himself from the hold, straightening his clothes. ‘I should order wakesage here more often. Read Descender while I’m at it.’

‘I’m not a substitute for him.’ He sniffs. ‘Seriously. And I’d be grateful if you didn’t dict about my … appetites.’ He nods, sensing, I cog, my withdrawal, and the finality of the moment. Fore he turns towards the thoroughfare, I hold his arm. ‘I can’t stop you from ordering wakesage here. Or reading Descender.’ He touches the hand I’ve placed on him. ‘It’s just gravity. Taye is yours. For now.’ He nods slowly. ‘I still dict with your mother. You should wit that.’

‘Oh, she told me. It’s funny. You said you’re not a substitute for Taye. To her, you might be substituting me,’ he dicts, laughing, but then he presses his lips against a quiver in his throat. I hug him again, letting him settle into being held for a few more moments.

There’s some strain in the way he walks towards the main street without turning back. I wouldn’t expect him to. His soul is Taye’s. Mine is a flicker of desire for him. In that Sensorial hierarchy, I’m what? Sacia, he dicted it? I viz him for a max while as he voys to the streetlift. He vizzes upwards, belonging too firm, I cog, in that world up there, where he shouldn’t belong but has been thrown.

The manicured street is disrupted by a single flycar with flames soaring from its bonnet and a massive projected sign declaring ‘FREE LOWERS REMEMBER THE FALLEN!’ They’ve unwist, then, that that boy was Barotic, Midburb. How sliply the boundaries blur. The customers at the brewery doors viz the flycar but don’t heed it. They just sip and shake their heads at the silly protest, glimmering ignorance. Why be worried when a Progressive sits on the Hallowed

Throne and her son is proof that the Society can be more equal, not radically so but comfortably so? I wonder how many of them even wit who I am. Even if they do, they don't care. They don't wit how to care about someone like me.

I wait until Miguel is out of vizzance and lope back in, and fack a Pyrrhic vir with Neo Druid locks too much sugar in his brew, which he vizzes and his hair sizzles in confusion.

I can only churn through another day and wait for my dislocation to mean somebit other than ruin. Those Veloxes, those people up there in their palace – those born Velox and those made Velox – can't be my concern now. Maybe one day I'll stop hiding all the parts of myself that I keep from the Society's vizzance. For now, my greenish hair and flair with sage leaves is enough for them to viz. I don't fit but I can make spaces that seem close enough.

Miguel could be a good distraction. Sex with him was full and empathic in a way I had never experienced. But Miguel has chosen the orbit of the compromised. Sensoriality just isn't enough to overcome the stench he'll obb from all that gilt and finery and conscience-soothing. Maybe he and his mother are headed for a break. I'd wit.

For now, I can just brew sage, smile at the virs, ignore Taye's face on everyone's crystalpod screens and nod along to the conceited chatter.

Reflective Essay

Failed Queerness: Finding Agentive Subjectivity against Narrative Pressure

I

In December 2005, I was in a spasm of spiritual angst. My sense of who and what I was – a 16-year-old gay boy and a zealous Mormon – had devolved into dissonance that I couldn't resolve. The only resort I had was writing. So, I penned in my journal a gushy, precocious screed, thrashing against the linguistic limits of my teenage mind and the horrors I was living:

> How dare I profane His mission for me by sinning so obviously, so evidently against my Father whom I love so dearly! What is it that forces me to act, against the commandments, against covenants and better judgement, against the nagging of the Spirit, to commit a sin so grievous it permeates my heart – hurts His, my Father's, heart – and weakens the bond? I cannot imagine how my flesh can commit such an act! How dare I be so evil! How dare I rebel!

I was failing at Mormonism. I couldn't resist the yearnings of my heart and flesh. I couldn't fit the narrative the church had set out for me. The result was discordance.

In late 2019, my world was shattering. Certainties were eroding, my sense of self was splintering and a reckoning was coming with my faith life and identity. My heart, my soul, had already settled into a new form, or perhaps something within was emerging and asserting its will. But I was still living in old clothes, running old routines, saying old sermons, performing a life that was fraying and probably visibly incoherent. When I knew it was time to declare in public the shifts that had already happened in private, I knew I would do it in writing. So, I wrote an essay and posted it on Medium. It was suitably, tediously long, but it was me and it was raw.

It was reflective, perhaps a bit memoir, and it came from a tradition of coming out narratives, as flawed as they are.[1] The setup was simple: a childhood ruined by dislocation, a teenagehood of sexual frustration and hardening closetedness, toxifying inconsistency between performed straightness and internal desire, and the resultant coming out moment at which all inconsistencies are resolved and the emerged self – always called the 'authentic' self – is freed. My story was also a Mormon coming out narrative, demonstrating common Mormonised tropes: entrenched Church teachings, a doctrinal understanding of the flesh as both divine and weak, intense faithfulness as an overcompensation, and the eventual rupture of faith in an inevitable cataclysm.

[1] See Jen Bacon, 'Getting the story straight: coming out narratives and the possibility of a cultural rhetoric', *World Englishes* 17(2), 1998.

I began the piece:

> I've often sensed that being gay is to experience tremoring contradictions. It shouldn't be that way, but modern humanity is so reliant on old norms that homosexuality is a sort of contrarianism, an inherently different way of being. It is at the nexus of faith and lived experience that homosexuality is most agonisingly destabilising.[2]

But my essay couldn't find the closure the form needed. I was coming out, yes, I was positioning myself at the periphery of a church that despises margins, but the reason for that emergence, the assumed end goal of that life, needed place in the story. I needed to declare freedom to date and love and fuck. But I couldn't. I knew I was only partially there. All I had done was make public a political position. I hadn't left that church or started dating or done anything that gave life to the label. Being 'out' felt less like an end of some struggle than a declaration of a mess.

And I ended the piece in a mess:

> Who knows what will happen in the coming months or years. Maybe I'll reconsider. But right now, this is right. … I am left in that nexus of some faith (at least in God Himself) and a now cherished identity as a gay man. My future feels, I think, bright, open, liberating. Faith-having if not faithful.[3]

Even now, nearly six years later, that mess holds. My 'out' life hasn't had the narrative closure I expected. My faith dissolved into atheism. Dating, flirting, sexual encounters have eluded me, or I have eluded them, bound up as I have been in the wreckage of my old life, old defence mechanisms and ways of living still exerting influence over me, cutting me off from progress, blocking paths to happiness, warping conceptions of my body as sexual and desiring and desirable and worthy. There wasn't freedom at the end of that essay's publication.

Miguel Vidente's narrative also ends in a mire in *Sentient Potential*. His life and world have been torn apart, but the central figure of the chaos and confusion has been Taye Velox, a man he feels for because he feels him entirely.

In the final pages, Miguel is in the embrace of Kehinde, someone who could give him sexually what Taye seems not able to (Kehinde is the narrator):

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[2] Michael McLeod, 'The Paradoxes and Ambiguities of "Gay" and "Mormon" (Original Version)', 21 December 2019, *Medium*, https://medium.com/@michael.i.mcleod/the-paradoxes-and-ambiguities-of-gay-and-mormon-original-version-38486ea0d36c.

[3] McLeod, 'The Paradoxes and Ambiguities of "Gay" and "Mormon" (Original Version)'.

> [Miguel says,] 'We're almanos most of the time.'
>
> I wit he senses the undertone to my next question. 'Do you want to be his? His soul? I mean, I undercog that you had no choice in how much of his ánimo got dumped into you. Fuck, did you even choose to care about him as much as you do? Or do you love him, if that's the word you want? Do you want this?'
>
> He swirls the remainder of his wakesage brew, watching it as if the answer would rise with the steam. 'I love him. I do. Desperately, emphatically, deliriously. I know every part of him. I've been him. I've held his soul in my body and heart and mind. You can't not love someone who has reached so deeply.'
>
> 'Do you want more?'
>
> 'More than his whole soul?' My responding 'mm-hmm' ripples with suggestion. He vizzes it, of course. 'No,' he dicts. 'No, I don't.'[4]

Miguel is a flawed character. Not in a moral sense but rather in that he might fail to fulfil the expectations of some readers. Even a queer reader may well want Miguel to find his queer end to prove the joy of his queerness, to avoid the tragedy of queer pain to which the world would otherwise limit him. He has been presented with the perfect man and given extraordinary access to that man's inner world – breaking all barriers that man could erect to stop a connection he would otherwise shun. All Miguel needs to do is push forward through the narratives that hold Taye in suspense and fuck his muscular way to bliss, social elevation and marital harmony.

But I couldn't give Miguel that ending. He doesn't want it. He doesn't even know why. I don't want it. Writing an end that I don't feel myself feels like a betrayal, even though fiction is meant to pull the writer from reality, to invent new ones. All Miguel knows is he has feelings, they don't make sense, Taye has feelings, no one understands the nature of their relationship, the story is ending and he's stuck in a side street telling Taye's gay twin that things just *are*.

Miguel is my failing queer subject. He lives in a fantastical world. I didn't make it a queer utopia. His community, his synod, is transgressive in how it orders and languages relationships along determinedly queer lines, but Taye's synod is more rigid, more akin to the real world's heteronormativity. Within the possibilities Miguel's narrative and context afford him, he realises a partial, unclear resolution.

[4] See pp. 228–229 herein.

II

Queerness is transgressive, disruptive and counter narrative. At least, that's what the word implies linguistically. Transgression cannot occur, really, unless an ideal is held up to it. In this way, queerness is alternate, comparison, the unexpected, the non-normative.

Narratives – by which I mean both the technical sequencing and arrangement of stories, and the expectations and contextual forces imposed onto texts by readers, readerships, market forces and cultural systems – can be strident things. Or writers like me can experience them that way. I find that narratives can insert themselves and demand homage. In their absence, they may scream for retrieval. When inverted, they are called counter narratives that are themselves narratives that anti-narrate other narratives. They don't have to feel bound by truth, but they can conjure new truths and hold new ideas to their power and sway. It's a wonder any subject makes it out alive from the maelstrom of colliding narratives in the world and on the page.

This presents the queer writer with a challenge. Our lives are already nominally transgressive. If we choose to write characters as queer and want our texts to be queer, those characters must diverge from some norm. Hence, there must be a norm – it must be clear to the reader and the character must struggle against it. Or we craft speculative worlds in which the norms are themselves different. Queerness in that case becomes normative in the world itself, and therefore loses its queerness. It becomes mainstream, the new template. The transgression then shifts from the characters to the pages, a book whose existence challenges the alternatives in the real world.

But what happens when the writer is himself failed at the issue upon which the novel hinges? I could have written a text that blossomed in its queer love and gave its queer protagonist the kind of ending that I suspect readers like me yearn to witness. Yet I couldn't. My own life hasn't had anything near that kind of joy. My coming out was a triumph, but being gay, doing gay loving and relationshipping gayly have stalled. If my life is tracking a 'mainstream' queer narrative, it has either got lost near the climax or decided on a 'lesser' path, where new endings have to be constructed to compensate for the failures.

I was always going to write a character who failed generic expectations near the end. I deprived him of the means to construct his normative ending and forced him to declare his failures. In so doing, I'm signalling perhaps that there should be space for the middling and failed. Maybe I could have found the right language to guide the reader there. I'm not sure if a

failure of craft is an issue my readers might sense. More likely, it's the failure of the narrative to ease towards closure.

I'm intrigued by inalterabilities. Critiquing the gravitational pull of narrative on the fiction writer is all very well, but I'm more concerned with how other kinds of inalterabilities, forces beyond narrative, are themselves impediments to narrative closure.

Queerness can be experienced as a kind of inalterability – not always, certainly, but I encounter my own queerness as a collision, a dialogue between things within me that seem so foundational and unchangeable, and with narratives external to me but impressing themselves on me. The result is passivity, not a buffeting by storms with no agency, but rather an agentive easing into the unalterable queer feelings, a refusal to fight them just because the narratives demand it, but an acknowledgement that the passivity chosen may be a disruption in itself.

This is where Miguel and I find ourselves. We are passive agents, at once bound by connections beyond our control or even our consent, muddling along paths both prescribed and imperfect, failing at expectations but empowered, at least in part, by the things we have eased into and the things we rub against.

III

That failure is a concept necessarily marked as negative can be contested. Indeed, it should be. The word itself denotes misalignment with some ideal and the negativity the alternative course necessitates on the subject.

Lee Edelman, in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, relies on Lacanian psychoanalysis in placing queerness in the Real, an indefinable thing that resists heteronormativity in the Symbolic, and suggesting that queerness is always negative: it cannot conform to the Symbolic's investment in reproducing futurity in the figure of the Child, and so is doomed to inhabit the death drive, never enough and always occupying that space between. To Edelman, then, queerness is a kind of failure, not in the sense that queer people are weak or insufficient or even that queer desires are problematic, but in that its very resistance to the Symbolic and the pulsion towards reproductive futurity can only be marked as a negative angle within the Symbolic.[5] Edelman revels in this negativity and urges a politics to work around it:

[5] Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Duke University Press, 2004).

> I am suggesting … that the efficacy of queerness, its real strategic value, lies in its resistance to a Symbolic reality that only ever invests us as subjects insofar as we invest ourselves in it, clinging to its governing fictions, its persistent sublimations, as reality itself. It is only, after all, to its figures of meaning, which we take as the literal truth, that we owe our existence as subjects and the social relations within which we live – relations we may well be willing, therefore, to give up our lives to maintain.[6]

He is willing to acknowledge that queer people may wish to enjoy some aspects of the Symbolic, such as gay marriage, a system that owes its allegiance to a particular construction and arrangement of social order:

> In urging an alternative to the party line, which every party endorses, in taking a side outside the logic of reproductive futurism and arguing that queers might embrace their figural association with its end, I am not for a moment assuming that queers – by which I mean all so stigmatised for failing to comply with heteronormative mandates – are not themselves also psychically invested in preserving the familiar familial narrativity of reproductive futurism.[7]

The scholar Sara Ahmed describes this more explicitly in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*:

> For queer theorists, it is hence important that queer lives do not follow the scripts of heteronormative culture. … Such lives would not desire access to comfort; they would maintain their discomfort with all aspects of normative culture in how they live. Ideally, they would not have families, get married, settle down into unthinking coupledom, give birth to and raise children, join neighbourhood watch, or pray for the nation in times of war. Each of these acts would 'support' the ideals that script such lives as queer, failed and unliveable in the first place. The aspiration to ideals of conduct that is central to the reproduction of heteronormativity has been called, quite understandably, a form of assimilation.[8]

But Ahmed also acknowledges the limits of this: 'more reflection on queer attachments might allow us to avoid positing assimilation or transgression as choices.'[9]

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[6] Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, 18.
[7] Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, 17.
[8] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 149.
[9] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 151.

In all of this, there is the problematised ideal (reproductive futurity for Edelman, the reproduction of heteronormativity for Ahmed) that cannot be achieved by the queer subject, and something suspect about the subject who wishes to assimilate or even find new ways to make queerness fit in the order.

Jack Halberstam (then writing as Judith), in the aptly titled *The Queer Art of Failure*, acknowledges Edelman's contributions but takes issue with Edelman's construction of queerness as negative and associated with the death drive.[10] For Halberstam, failure is politically emancipatory because it allows the subject to encounter alternatives to prevailing systemic, capitalistic demands of success and achievement, because '[f]ailure, of course, goes hand in hand with capitalism'. For Halberstam, queerness is political because it is 'a narrative about anticolonial struggle, the refusal of legibility, and an art of unbecoming. … The queer art of failure turns on the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely, and the unremarkable. It quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being.'[11] This can be expanded to an entire political project: 'Queer studies offer us one method for imagining, not some fantasy of an elsewhere, but existing alternatives to hegemonic systems.'[12] Halberstam's provocation is intriguing. It invokes all the necessary fuzzy feelings it should for writers like me who find queer theory a bit bleak and preoccupied with 'death drives'. Halberstam collapses queerness into a sociopolitical environment that might grant the subject, as individual, an empowering way to move through time and space, but the polemic is too abstract and invested in outward-facing destruction.

Ahmed comes closest to articulating my own sense that my queerness is unformed or somehow 'failed' when she notes this:

> Queer lives do not suspend the attachments that are crucial to the reproduction of heteronormativity, and this does not diminish 'queerness', but intensifies the work that it can do. Queer lives remain shaped by that which they fail to reproduce. To turn this around, queer lives shape what gets reproduced: in the very failure to reproduce the norms through how they inhabit them, queer lives produce different effects. For example, the care work of lesbian parents may involve 'having' to live in close proximity to heterosexual cultures (in the negotiation with schools, other mothers, local communities), whilst not being able to inhabit the heterosexual

[10] Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, 106.
[11] Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke University Press, 2011), 88.
[12] Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 89.

> ideal. … It is important, when considering how this potential is translated into transformation, that we do not create a political imperative; for example, by arguing that all lesbian parents should actively work to interrupt the scripts of compulsory heterosexuality.[13]

I think Ahmed has the right instinct here. The propulsion of academic discourse in this area might make queerness seem an eternal raging against norms, conscripting queer subjects as combatants in an intellectual and political war whose end must be the obliteration of everything and a giddy freedom for everyone to fuck whom they want in genital bliss. That might only be a slight exaggeration. The reality for me (and for Miguel) is that life is lived within and around structures and not every act and thought needs to set the whole thing on fire.

IV

The ideas expressed above are all very good and well as political and philosophical abstracts. They do, however, extend to literature and literary theories too, and it is here that queerness becomes more than a feature of a text or a facet of a character, or even a component of the author's voice. It erupts from plot and voicing to coopt text into protest, disrupting norms outside the text, inside the reader and the realm of the Symbolic itself. Teresa de Lauretis makes this plain in her (self-describedly provisional) definition of what makes a text queer:

> I may provisionally call queer a text of fiction – be it literary or audiovisual – that not only works against narrativity, the generic pressure of all narrative toward closure and the fulfilment of meaning, but also pointedly disrupts the referentiality of language and the referentiality of images …[14]

Indeed. She goes further – much further – to imbue queer texts with the requirement of a sexual critique:

> [Queer texts] would not qualify … as queer, in my current view, if they did not prompt a reader to ask, … 'Can you read and not see that something new has been said about the very heart of sex?' Here, then, is a further and, to my mind, not sufficient but necessary

[13] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 152-153.

[14] Teresa de Lauretis, 'Queer Texts, Bad Habits, and the Issue of a Future', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 17(2-3), 243-263.

> specification: a queer text carries the inscription of sexuality as something more than sex. … I have called queer the space in which Freud imagines the drive to operate, moving from the body to the mind and vice versa, because it is a space not just nonhomogeneous but more precisely heterotopic: it is the space of a transit, a displacement, a passage and transformation, not a referential but a figural space.[15]

I can admit that my memoirish writing would meet de Lauretis's standard for queer. The disruption my essays caused to the referentiality of doctrine and assumptions about sexuality within my church community was not insubstantial and led, in one memorable exchange with a church leader, to being warned that I was 'borderline apostate' for merely stating an identity that jarred with the hegemonic order's consistency. But the process of creative writing, especially of fiction, is more multi-faceted than the memoir essay form. Fiction can have other preoccupations, even if just the exploration of some characters in some place and time, doing life in some way that is interesting and moving.

While online discourse isn't necessarily an accurate representation of real-world discourses, one can sense that there is an expectation among audiences for texts that incorporate queer characters and queer themes. Those expectations exert a force on the narratives within the texts and the narratives around them. I don't mean to suggest that these debates are always substantive, edifying or representative, but they do form a component at least of the narratives within which queer writers write and queer readers read, and the commercial forces in publishing and popular culture. It fascinates me that these narratives around queer literature can often devolve (in my reading at least) into a tension between two extremes. On the one side is the failure of queer characters and plotlines to find their heteronormative ends. This is queerness in its failed form. It fails the norms that it naturally subverts and the plot highlights this in discrimination, adversity and antagonism. The reader is reminded of the distinctiveness of the queer characters and mourns for the struggles they must endure because of their inherent and consistent failure to find the happiness their society posits. Plenty of writers and commentators note the heaviness in recurrent tragedies and stolen happy endings in the genre.[16] On the other hand are those who demand queer joy, the fulfilment of queer lives in literature – whether despite prejudice or because their societies are enlightened enough to allow queer joy to exist on

[15] de Lauretis, 'Queer Texts, Bad Habits, and the Issue of a Future', 243-245.

[16] See for example Seán Hewitt, 'Is Queer Literature Better Off With Stories of Trauma, or Without Them?', 1 June 2023, *Cultured*, https://www.culturedmag.com/article/2023/06/01/queer-literature-trauma-narratives-sean-hewitt.

equal terms with other kinds.[17] A narrative deviation from this end results in the sticky problem of queer pain. Some may protest queer fiction's lack of happy ends, arguing, as Ahmed does above, that the recurrence of these narratives of pain reinforces the heteronormativity and isolates the queer reader as terminally incapable of the joy sought.

V

When theory meets fiction (or collides with it perhaps), it brings with it a perspective on narrativity. Queer theory might lead to the conclusion that narrative conventions in fiction are a kind of heteronormative Symbolic, an agent of reproductive futurity, because they are concerned with creating order in space and time. Within this framework, the counter to narrativity is antinarrativity, which Tyler Bradway describes as a frame that 'presumes a universally antagonistic relationship between queerness and narrative'.[18]

Narrative, then, in a very conventional and simplistic sense propels a novel's characters towards some constructed end. I acknowledge, of course, that many writers write against this, but I'm describing here a generic move that does exist, that a writer as inexperienced as I am knows and feels and imbibes from popular culture. Stories all around me have those constructed ends. Maybe they're bad stories or insufficiently daring stories, but they're there and they're part of the ether.

In fiction, narrative closure might be marriage or at the least the fulfilment of sexual tension and romantic suggestion towards some sexual and romantic end that reinforces the characters' surrender to heteronormative demands. Narratives have many ends, of course – many don't always locate closure in sex and romance – but the force, the gravitational pull remains nonetheless because readers encounter texts with expectations that are themselves informed by narratives in prior reading or metanarratives in cultural production and context. This, I think, is what de Lauretis means when she says that texts encounter 'the generic pressure of all narrative toward closure and the fulfilment of meaning'.[19] Even when writers resist or write against these

[17] See for example Emma Copley Eisenberg, 'How "Right" and "Wrong" Ways to Be Queer Are Changing Fiction', 21 May 2024, *Esquire*, https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/books/a60825659/queer-morality-changing-fiction/.

[18] Tyler Bradway, 'Queer Narrative Theory and the Relationality of Form', *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, 136.5 (2021): 711-12.

[19] de Lauretis, 'Queer Texts, Bad Habits, and the Issue of a Future', 244.

impulses, they do so knowing the audience's awareness of narrative defaults, and even a subversive text might fall at times into traditional structures and compulsions.

What then of queer texts? Queerness and narrative conflict in 'a structural antagonism: the open-ended (queer) drift of the signifier pulls against narrative's (heteronormative) desire for closure.'[20] What this means, though, is that queer texts as antinarrative texts cannot antinarrate unless there's a narrative against which they struggle; there is no rebellion without a norm to oppose, nothing queer in a normless system. Queer texts might even be bound by narrative needs; they merely respond with disfigurement or transgression, finding themselves just as obsessed with the existence of the narrative norm as any conventional text.

Edelman comes close to resonating with what I want out of a queer text but yanks it away as soon as I approach it:

> Are we willing to be sufficiently oppositional to the structural logic of opposition–oppositional, that is, to the logic by which politics reproduces our social reality – to accept that the figural burden of queerness, the burden that queerness is phobically produced precisely to represent, is that of the force that shatters the fantasy of Imaginary unity, the force that insists on the void (replete, paradoxically, with jouissance) always already lodged within, though barred from, symbolisation: the gap or wound of the Real that inhabits the Symbolic's very core? Not that we are, or ever could be, outside the Symbolic ourselves; but we can, nonetheless, make the choice to accede to our cultural production as figures – within the dominant logic of narrative, within Symbolic reality – for the dismantling of such a logic and thus for the death drive it harbours within.[21]

This is precisely the dilemma. *Sentient Potential* 'accede[s] to our cultural production … within the dominant logic of narrative', but not 'for the dismantling of such a logic' necessarily or intentionally. It accedes to some cultural production, works within it, makes sense of itself in an invented world, justifies its divergences, but there isn't a need to dismantle the whole logic of text or heteronorms or politics proper.

Because of this tension, Tyler Bradway develops the idea of queer relationality as a better fit for queer narratology than antinarrativity. For them, 'queer belonging [is] a specific kind of narrative problem and highlights how even avowedly antinarrative texts depend on narrative to

[20] Bradway, 'Queer Narrative Theory and the Relationality of Form', 712.
[21] Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, 22.

figure and extend queer relationality'.[22] Working within narrative scaffolding or at least not succumbing to polemics about narrativity, queer texts can present queer lives in sequences that might otherwise appear random, creating a 'continuity [that] affords queerer possibilities than closure'.[23] Queerness and queer lives relate with each other, with other lives and with the structures they inhabit and navigate. These relations are not necessarily linear or teleological, but rather a continuity of moments. There is coherence only in that the moments flow between each other, thus creating new norms or ideas that are radical in their unpredictability. Closure and norm-defiance are not the point.

I find Bradway's work a gentler description of what queer texts can do, in a way that is much broader than the simplistic political causticity required by some. Queerness opens up possibilities in the narrative, even when those possibilities are normative or assimilative, coherent only in that relations occur across pages appositionally and require innovation on the reader's part to make sense. This feels right to me, or at least to my writing. The queerness in *Sentient Potential* doesn't require closure, but instead offers relationality.

VI

Of course, queer writers have found ways to subvert and explode narrative conventions in their zeal to shatter heteronormative boundaries, but that is an activity in which I have no consistent investment. Instead, I have a main character whose queerness isn't necessarily the problem. It's the nature of the relationship he forms with Taye that is. Their relationship is queer in that a queer man is one of its subjects and in that the relationship doesn't fit heteronormative monikers or even 'traditional' queer ones, both in the world of the text and our own. It's fuzzy and open-ended. It's messy. It fails convention. It provides no closure. It is queer relationality, to return to Bradway's term.

Miguel is neurotic. He overfeels, overthinks and can't find language to make sense of his interiority. Narrative demands pull at him. He feels compelled to account to the reader and explain his deviation from expectation. Taye, who has grown up in a system that Edelman would say reproduces futurity quite well, also must navigate these demands. He and Miguel discuss this near the novel's end (Miguel is the speaker):

[22] Bradway, 'Queer Narrative Theory and the Relationality of Form', 717.
[23] Bradway, 'Queer Narrative Theory and the Relationality of Form', 716.

> [Taye] snorts. ‘Maybe the will is in choosing what to do with the exteria that are in our control. So. Is almanistad the right word for this conexión?’
>
> ‘I think so,’ I reply. ‘It’s funny. I’ve read about almanistad, heard about it, seen it in others.’
>
> ‘It’s not that consuming one?’
>
> ‘Consumidad?’ I sigh too quickly. ‘Maybe it’s that too. At times it is. But if we’re honest, what your heart wants is almanistad. The partner of your soul. Someone who knows your soul and lets you see his. I didn’t know I wanted that too.’
>
> He’s not sure. There’s something too imposing about this. He looks at our hands, still bound, and the shame resurfaces. ‘Kinetics will assume this is sexual. And deviant,’ he says. ‘You wit that, verit? They will not approve of two men being like this. This needs to be hidden.’
>
> ‘Are you sure that’s what you want?’
>
> He shakes his head slowly. ‘You’re assuming Sensorials are the end point of progress, that your ways are enlightened. Are they, though? Ye are that way because ye feel and wit in ways the rest of us don’t. I don’t wit, fra, I veritly don’t. I want this almanistad even though I don’t. Viz me using Sensorial lingo.’ He laughs, heartily and freely.[24]

The narrative needed them to have this conversation. The language I had at my disposal casts their connection as sensual. How else could I encode sentimental intimacy? Once Miguel can sense Taye’s soul, the connection is beyond platonic bounds. Heteronormativity requires that friendship remains less than romance, ideally gendered so it cannot be more than romance. Romance is the ideal, the highest love and gravity of conventional narrative. All characters must orbit it. They can flirt with their distance from it, finding higher orbits for a time, but eventually they must lose energy and fall to romantic conclusion.

The problem I faced was the gravitational well was so strong that I had to make Miguel grapple with it. He simultaneously doesn’t want romantic closure, but also doesn’t want queer pain. Where he lands is a midpoint, a relationship that exists as a continuity of relational moments. When viewed in this way, there isn’t a closure that is needed. No label outside the text suffices to encompass the complexities of what he and Taye share. I did, however, do a lot of work to create a linguistic framework for queerness and relational patterns, called conexiones, in the novel. The Sensorials by nature encounter each other through thought and feeling, not just

[24] See p. 220 herein.

words and gestures, which means that desire is clear, queerness would be obvious and unhideable, and the need to structure relationships within heterosexual norms would be futile. I employed Spanish to create a schema of relationships, with varying degrees of sexual, romantic, affective and familial intersections. I did this to account for the divergences in the text and to scaffold Miguel's queerness onto a followable script. But his relationship with Taye breaches even those rich Sensorial labels precisely because Taye isn't Sensorial himself.

The relationship just *is*. It makes sense only because what happens happens, in the order that it happens, with the people to whom it happens and with whom and of whom and around whom. Miguel's narrative arc isn't a failure, then, but a muddle, a mess, a thing that defies gravity but doesn't need to either.

But this raises a new question. Could Miguel's arc not be failure in his own existence or narratively, but a failure of craft, in the construction of the character? Were there other tools I could have used to give the relationship more heft and coherence, to give structure to what I was suggesting?

VII

Heteronormativity from the ambient South African culture into which I was born, inflected as it was with racial, gendered and class aspects, wasn't the only set of narratives against which my inner life struggled for reference and meaning. I was raised in the Mormon Church and devoted a chunk of my adult life to it too. It was the doctrinal edifice that scaffolded my sense of reality.

Mormonism intentionally embeds a rigid framework of worldviews and rules into the sociality of the congregation. It also, again very intentionally, disempowers the subject, the member, and frames the individual's reality against an external locus. Perfection, cleanliness, godliness and the presence of the Spirit are predicated upon a sense of worthiness that is at once definable and unattainable, rendering the subject always just out of reach of joy and always in a self-monitored state of compliance and repentance. This might seem heavily mental and esoteric, but Mormonism is also an embodied religion. Even compared to its sister faiths, formed in Antebellum America, Mormonism is unusual in positing that God is a person of flesh and bone, that mortality is required because it clothes spirits in flesh. Mortality is the process in which the pure, innocent spirit, the child of a Heavenly Father and a Heavenly Mother, is brought to an earth, veiled from its memory of its former life, and given a weak, susceptible body to trial faith. The body is endowed with deific potential: if the subject is worthy, it can attain a resurrected

state of salvation in which body and spirit are united for eternity in what Mormons call exaltation. Eternal marriage and eternal families are part of this embodied, salvific futurity.

It is this fleshy aspect that grounds the esoterica of doctrine, dogma and scripture in something reachable and graspable. But the flesh isn't holy in mortality. It must be made holy through grit and atonement. Thus, to the Mormon subject, the body and the spirit must be in constant conflict. The desires of the body are suspect, marked as corruptible and satanic, while the impulses of the spirit are pure and heavenly. The subsumption of the former by the latter is the drive of the religion.

Edelman would understand this at once. Mormonism is a coherent, perhaps extreme system of the Symbolic. The spirit is the Imaginary. The body is the Real, the undefinable desires against which the Symbolic struggles to make meaning.

For the gay Mormon subject, the body is more than flesh. Its desires are more than suspect. They are uncontrollable. They propel the subject to want, to connect, to fuck in ways that defy the doctrine's hold, but the negative arc of these desires, their rejection of the Symbolic's grasp, reinforces the Symbolic's view of the body. Thus, the Mormon subject's suffering is absorbed by the general struggle of flesh and spirit, even if its particular verve feels so much more virile and intense. No amount of signification could satisfy the divergence of my body from the norm of the faith. We could even call it a narrative – and Mormonism had given me a narrative that was simple and desirable. The narrative pressure to conform and to want it was immense and it seemed to come from doctrine, from the people in the system and from my own imaginary. But no amount of grit or self-mastery, pleading or praying could make that narrative work. I had to arc away.

There were narratives fed to me to warn me against departure. They predicted apostasy, darkness, regret, the loss of the Spirit, alienation from community and the risk of my salvation. The most potent narrative, one I'd given to others in my earnest days as a proselytising missionary, was elegant in its poetic simplicity: you'll leave, but you'll come back because you know it's true. The narratives loop in on themselves, enfolding the gay Mormon subject in a cascade of self-reinforcing reproductions of the heterosexual order, ensuring the compliance of the subject in the order's futurity of pliant members in this life and embodied gods in heterosexual union and billions of offspring in the next.

So, I came out of the closet (an action that is narrative in itself, with a pre-coming out beginning, a crisis, disclosure and a post-coming out future that is meant to be better) and a few months later left the Mormon Church. The certainties of those Mormon narratives, that deafening

stream of the Symbolic, mostly vanished and I had to make new paths. Years later, however, I haven't found the narratively satisfying happy endings the coming out narrative suggested. I haven't dated, I'm as virgin as I was when I was Mormon, and I find myself immobilised by the immensity of the changes required, the layers of fossilised thinking I have to unpack before queer relationality is even possible. Indeed, there has been plenty of suffering in the liminal space of my post-coming out narrative. Things are unfinished, unformed, failing or succeeding in bits and spurts, movement jagged and twirling, therapy helping but also recursive.

The heterosexual world at times incorporates the homosexual couple as a new norm of reproductive futurity. Gays too can participate in happiness in the social order of sexual joy and familial fulfilment. In the West, one could even argue that a homonormative Symbolic is emerging (or was emerging until recent elections signalled a backlash). This premise is provocative too. There is the closet of pain, a coming out, an exhilaration of exploration and the promise of gay coupling. I've had the first three steps, but the last as eluded me. Even the new, inclusive narratives are failing me or I'm failing them. Mormonism has indeed trained me well.

VIII

The word 'subject' contains ironies in English. Its use in the literature of queer theory, informed by psychoanalytics and other fields, is extensive. The theorists I've already cited employ its use in a complex duality that reveals the crux of the issue I'm trying to tease out here.

Without getting too bogged down in the metaphysics of subjectivity, whether identity and the subject are or should be linked and whether choice is even a thing, it is possible to note at the very least that the word 'subject' is used in two seemingly contradictory ways.

The first is *the* subject, who is a being of agency, a sense of self that emerges and operates within time and space by exertion or will or action or angle – the form might be vague but action is the compulsive power. This is the subject in the grammatical sense: it is the thing onto which the verb is grafted, allowing action to occur because, grammatically, action cannot emerge *ex nihilo* but requires a force, an actor, to trigger it. There are critiques to this view that can be metaphysically convoluted and aren't necessary here, but suffice it to observe that the subject has a kind of agentive power. It is this power that writers such as Ahmed would grant the queer subject in its angling away from norms.

But English (as English does so well) can also invert the word's meaning to denote the opposite of agency. This is the passive voice, the subject becoming *a* subject *to* something else, a

king's subjects, the destruction of agency under the agency of another, a subject's subjectification.

I find this irony productive. My gayness as queerness is agentive inasmuch as I have used agency to exert control over my trajectory. And I'm certainly invested in my agency as associated to some sense of self as distinct from others, even if that conception is a fantasy of neurons, language and symbol.

Nevertheless, while living as a Mormon, I encountered sexuality not agentively but passively – at least that was the experiential tone of it. One of the defining features of my coming out was my settling into the contours and solidity of what I felt was imposed on me, what I was subjected to, the feelings towards men I couldn't control. I was a passive subject in a body that resisted conscious efforts to deform its desires and fantasies. Feeling trapped and controlled, manipulated down paths I emphatically did not choose, was the timbre of my experience. I wasn't a deviation so much as a reluctant victim of deviating narratives. I was a failure of Western individualistic agency, the willpower of the one, a failure to use my mind and resources to cohere as required.

My queerness is not about polemics and transgression so much as finding the blissful pleasure of not fighting, accepting my disempowerment, but also finding that not fighting my sexuality positions me within the otherness of other narratives.

I suspect my view is somewhat quaint. Much of the political discourse around queer rights, particularly gay rights discourse, seems to have centred being 'born this way'. This was an effective tool: framing gay people as needing the right to love and marry people of the same gender because it is inherent to their being and beyond their control helped to make it a civil rights concern. Denying gay people these rights would deny them an immutable need beyond their control, hence the injustice. This approach can be critiqued, not because the experience of non-straight sexual attraction or transgender identity doesn't feel immutable or beyond control (for most, it likely does), but because it can be fluid and it should be within the ambit of human agency for people to choose different approaches to gender and sexuality.

I agree with the sentiment and acknowledge the quaintness in centring passivity in the queer experience, but it resonates too heavily with me. The mere choice of living a heteronormative life – following the staid script – could even be seen as an act of more agency than accepting queerness on its terms. It is an act, in the real sense of the word, of forcing and warping life to fit into narratives that don't align. There is also willpower and action in being out, of course. There is an emotional drain in the need to signify one's differentiation from norms.

But there is the internal ease, a choice to use one's agency to accept the unchangeable and employ willpower to embrace and blossom that life. In other words, the choice the queer subject must make is which paths, narratives and selves must be surrendered to – where the energy will be invested. Other narratives will snap into place in response, but the choice will have been made and passivity is the empowering agent. It is agentive passivity.

What I am trying to say with this solipsistic diversion is that queerness isn't necessarily just rebellion or obstruction or explosion. It isn't necessarily even about power and agency and choice, or on the other hand about acceptance of the uncontrollable. Whatever its origin or usefulness, whatever the problems with queerness as a mark within the hegemonic order that seeks to other things that do not conform with it, queerness in human living and consequently in text is a phenomenon that leads to a cascade of passivities that the subject must navigate. For me, the acceptance of my body, mind and soul's desiring of other men was beyond my control, and aligning myself within that, embracing my passivity in the matrix, brought the angle of my trajectory to a new set of circumstances, perspectives and contexts, some of which I can control and some I cannot. Marking myself as a gay man in the context in which I live triggers a set of reactions to me and constructions of myself in the linguistic and social dimensions of the matrix, but opens up a different set of actions to which I did not have access – levers I couldn't even think to pull – when my trajectory was different, when I was fighting contradictory narratives in my Mormon trajectory.

IX

I didn't plan to strip Miguel of so much agency. It took one chapter before he was rendered a passive mote in another family's psychodrama. Perhaps there should have been warning signs. (There were. Some were articulated by generous readers.)

Miguel's community, the Sensorial Synod, is unique in the Society of the Potent. All other Potents have powers that are active in nature; they assert forces on themselves or on the world. Sensorials are passive: they receive, sense, read and experience the thoughts, feelings or futures of others.

When Miguel's normal ride to work is disrupted by protesters, his detour leads to a rendezvous with the gorgeous, enigmatic Taye. The forces leading him to this encounter already position his passivity.

The reader doesn't know at this point that Taye is under the influence of a magical narcotic called seersage. When he shakes Miguel's hand, Miguel's powers sense a seersage-amplified stream. This overwhelms his powers and causes an immediate and intense magical connection. Taye's emotional world is practically downloaded into Miguel's body, which struggles to interpret and embody the rush. This isn't a bidirectional, evolving dance between two independent agents trying to relate through speech, gestures, codes, practices and expectations. It's a forging of two actors, one of whom encompasses the emotional animus of the other. In all of these ways, Miguel's passivity is heightened. He has not consented to the meeting, the drugs or the sensing. Taye isn't exactly in control, but he exerts more power – literally, socially and relationally.

I found Miguel's passivity lingering as the story progressed. He's always around the action, sometimes in the background, sometimes sitting next to the key players, functioning as a receptacle of emotional content and observation. But Miguel makes choices within the narratives imposed upon and coming at him. He could refuse to answer Taye's calls, spend time with him or run into rioting streets with him. He is bound to Taye in space and time through external forces, but he chooses to maintain the unchosen initial connection. The narrative keeps giving him opportunities either to leave or to get Taye to wake up to his sexual needs. At times, the narrative urges Miguel to reformulate his view of Taye along more predictable, homonormative terms. He's invited to fall for Taye. Others suggest he's already done so. But he doesn't. There is an agency within his passivity that keeps him with Taye, by his side, allied next to him, in a kind of unlabellable communion. As narratives, queer and heteronormative alike, have converged in these men, as Miguel has failed generic narrative demands, it is an agentive passivity that has emerged as his best response. He has actively eased into the uncontrollable knowing of another human's interiority and the result is generative, a new relational construct, a muddled, middling thing.

Miguel's queerness is a factor in this, but certainly not the prime element. Rather, his agentive passivity is a queering characteristic of the narrative.

X

I see agentive passivity in contemporary queer fiction too.

It emerges in South African work, including recently in Alistair Mackay's *It Doesn't Have to Be This Way*. Queerness comes under attack in dystopic Cape Town. A gay man, Luthando,

discovers that his deceased lover, Viwe, had a child with his ex-girlfriend, Noxolo. Warlords have imposed extreme homophobic rule on the city, so Luthando agentively chooses to marry Noxolo, forming a straight-seeming family from the rubble of loss and prejudice. He acts within the horrific societal restrictions imposed on him and the result allows him to be a father to Viwe's son – and survival.[25]

Siya Khumalo (who, like me, began writing non-fiction and memoir and evolved into fiction) constructs another dystopian future in *The Queer Book of Revelation.* Like Mackay, he imagines a future after climate catastrophe where the protagonist, John, lives in an elite enclosed community where emotions are suppressed by AI overlords to maintain humanity's subjection. John's sexuality emerges passively within the strictures of this homophobic society and he experiences gay desire for Joshua, a man from outside the community, and acts on it. Khumalo extends this by introducing time-travellers who intervene (agentively) in human history. In the process, their actions, intentionally or otherwise, end up queering historical figures, including transgendering Jesus, to allow time to exert new timelines and narratives on reality itself. John is recruited by these travellers and works himself through time, finding extreme agency to change time, but he is doomed to suffer the linear consequences of altering these patterns. Khumalo has found a decidedly queer way of exploring agentive passivity through time, space and the heart.[26]

American writer Brandon Taylor in *Real Life* writes the mess of a straight-seeming, all-American man, Miller, finding himself having sex with the gay protagonist, Wallace. Miller believes he's straight, so his attraction to Wallace and their sexual encounters disrupt his sense of identity and sexual trajectory, simultaneously opening him up from previously held passivities and exposing him to the seemingly uncontrollable feelings his mind and body are now producing. Miller has every reason to resist his feelings agentively, to insist on his straightness, problematise his queer feelings and decline to engage in a societally disempowered sexual relationship. Instead, Miller agentively chooses to go with his attraction and physical longing, embracing passivity and discovering new parts of himself. Wallace also agentively allows this relationship to form and flourish, even when Miller's inexperience and occasional anger at his burgeoning queerness cause friction and, in one scene, a physical altercation that becomes an aggressive sexual moment. There is a kind of maximal agency for these characters who allow

[25] Alistair Mackay, *It Doesn't Have to Be This Way* (Kwela Books, 2024).
[26] Siya Khumalo, *The Queer Book of Revelation* (Kwela Books, 2024).

themselves to accede in each moment to what doesn't make nominal sense or cohere with what they thought they knew about themselves.[27]

Nigerian writers are perhaps particularly attuned to agentive passivity, given Nigeria's profoundly hostile environment for queer people. In *Blessings*, Chukwuebuka Ibeh, for example, positions a gay man in precisely the binds and horrors I have described, but he finds ways to relate, connect and flourish through an agentive exertion despite the subjectifying forces around him. A bleak, fuzzy ending isn't a failure of Ibeh to imagine queer utopias, but a real, raw and moving description of queer life. The protagonist, Obiefuna, is faced with the dissolution of his secret homosexual relationship with Miebi. The text establishes their love as an easy, agentive surrendering to a forbidden love even under increasingly belligerent laws. Soon, however, Miebi's family compels him to marry a woman to satisfy cultural demands and he wants to avoid the scrutiny that Nigeria's government is imposing on gay life. When he informs Obiefuna of his choice, it is clear that agency is operating within rapidly collapsing domains of manoeuvre:

> Obiefuna paused in the middle of picking up another watermelon cube and looked up at him. It was odd, how the implication for their relationship had not fully registered with him. The prospect of a decision seemed to elude him. What he felt now, he realised, more than betrayal, more than hurt, was despair: for Chinedum, for Miebi, for all people of their kind all over the country, building relationships, investing so much of themselves over time. How do you begin something beautiful with the certainty of its end? You gave yourself over to love and lived the rest of your life knowing you never stood a chance; all it took was a girl somewhere and family pressure to end it. He wanted to laugh. And then he realised that what he really wanted to do was cry.[28]

Ibeh has struck the right chord. How indeed do we 'begin something beautiful with the certainty of its end?' The beginning is agentive; the certainty of end is the passive imposition. What is queerer and more agentively passive than giving 'yourself over to love'?

[27] Brandon Taylor, *Real Life* (Daunt Books Originals, 2000).
[28] Chukwuebuka Ibeh, *Blessings* (Viking, 2022), 240.

XI

Certainly, I can't deny that Miguel's sexuality in *Sentient Potential* gives him an insight into Taye that destabilises Taye's expectations. Theirs is a relationship that makes sense to me because friendships with straight men are among the most cherished in my life. Some were formed when narratives deprived me of human contact that could imperil my salvation. My response, within that agentive passivity, was the unusual thrill and exultant healing of the unromanceable straight man. I suppose it was inevitable that Miguel would find the same surprising connection.

There is something exhausting about narrative force. It requires failure as the consequence for its rejection. Failure is a heavy word. I should problematise it. But I like the force of it. I can embrace my failure as a queer subject, the failure of my writing to form a good queer character or do the right queer things and challenge through form and text the imperialist heterosexist forces arrayed against me and people like me.

I could be a 'better' gay man and identify the problems with expectations and narratives and tweets and screeds and everything that forms the context to my life. I could easily be holding myself to standards that only exist in my head or in my warped understanding of what people want, of internalised narrativity. After all, I grew up in a religion that determinedly shaped a twisted conception of myself. Escaping from that system brought intellectual and moral freedoms, but those old Mormon thoughts still linger. They come up for air every now and then, surprising me with their insistence and quaintness.

Queerness has been discovery for me. It's an unfolding. *Sentient Potential* was crafted in all its imperfections by an imperfect man who is trying to make sense of things so bizarre, yet so inherently part of himself, of myself. So much of that text was written without my exertion: the characters spilled out of me passively and I agentively let them.

It was a dance of control within disempowerment, of textual queering and queer surrender, of halves and sort-ofs and semi-critiques of the hegemonic.

Frankly, there are too many narratives for Miguel and me to combat or resist or critique or bat away. We find ease in the unchangeable and meaning in the queerness of messy, muddled, failed passivity that acts and positions and angles away.

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