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# THE QUICKSAND THEATRE COMPANY

MOLLY RINGLE

Dear reader,

Thank you so much for giving this book a chance! I know there are hundreds of tempting options for you to choose from, every season, so I'm honored you picked up mine. It means a lot to me.

When I started writing this novel, it was early 2023. We were all slogging our way out of COVID-land and back into so-called real life. I was tired and stressed, and my main goal in deciding what to write next was: "What would be the absolute most fun thing I could write, at this moment in my life?"

You have the results in the pages ahead of you. It's a kaleidoscopic madness of traveling theatre, fandom inspirations, fae curses, true love, total irreverence, a vampire-ish creature who is both inadvertently funny and everyone's most lethal problem, and an exuberant abundance of compassion and loyal friendship. All wrapped in sequins and stage makeup. And yes—I did have the most fun ever while creating it, and am still pining for (and with) these characters.

I hope you love reading it even half as much as I loved writing it. And mainly, I hope you come up with a creative project that would be the most fun ever for you personally, and I hope you get to do it.

All the best,  
Molly



2026

**Content Warnings:**

Abduction, anxiety, betrayal, grief, family deaths (in past), imprisonment/confinement, injuries, mental and physical damage caused by magic, murder, sexual content (consensual), suicidal ideation.

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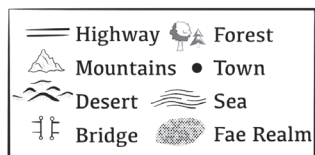
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For the whistleblowers, the comedians, and the lovers.  
The world needs all of you very much.

# EIDOLONIA





## PRONUNCIATION NOTE

Eidolonia's humans come, ancestrally, from a wide variety of countries, a mix that is reflected in people's names and geographic names. Names derived from non-English languages are pronounced more or less in that language's fashion.

The letter combination "ch" in Italian is pronounced like English "k"—thus "Delvecchio" = "del-VEK-ee-oh." And in Italian, "c" followed by "e" or "i" is pronounced like English "ch"—thus "Città" = "chee-TAH" (stress on second syllable), and "Marcello" = "mar-CHELL-o." Otherwise, Italian consonants are similar to English's, and Italian vowels are pronounced nearly the same as Spanish vowels. "Vai" rhymes with "my."

"Javier" should be pronounced in more or less the Spanish way, with an English "h" sound for the "j."

The Chinese sound transliterated as "x" doesn't have an exact match in English, but "sh" is closest. "Xian" is roughly "shyen," one syllable.

Names native to Eidolonia, such as names of fae, follow a more phonetically transparent pattern, from the English-spelling point of view. Your best guess at how to pronounce "Melu Ros" or "Nalibak" is probably pretty close to the way I've been saying them. None of us humans are pronouncing the fae tongue correctly anyway.

*This page is part of the Eidolonian Intranet: protected by fae spells and certified Unhackable Crosswater by Eidolonian witches. Welcome!*

## Eidolonia

Eidolonia is an island country in the north Pacific Ocean, consisting of one large main landmass and more than one hundred smaller islands. Only about one-sixth of this area is inhabited by humans, nearly all of it along the main island's coast, the rest being fae territory.

The country has no close neighbors, lying roughly equidistant from Hawaii, the Aleutian Islands, and Japan. Its climate is temperate. Eidolonia is a constitutional monarchy, with a royal family as well as a prime minister and other democratically elected officials.

Eidolonia was entirely fae territory until the early 1700s, when the fae allowed a few sailors from various countries to find the island. They permitted a limited number of additional human immigrants over ensuing years, making deals to allow human settlements, which gradually grew to encompass the entire coastline. Eidolonia is undetectable to outsiders (crosswaters) due to concealment spells maintained by the fae, and humans who leave the island will not remember it, with false memories taking its place, unless they carry a memory charm, enspelled by witches and fae, that preserves their knowledge of the country.

An estimated two-thirds of Eidolonian humans have some fae ancestry due to intermixing. Approximately half of humans on Eidolonia, regardless of ancestry, are born with witch abilities, being matter-witches (able to manipulate inanimate matter), exo-witches (able to manipulate other living things), or endo-witches (able to manipulate their own forms). The magical powers of the fae, in nearly all cases, are stronger than those of witches.

The verge, the border between fae and human territory, underwent select alterations in 2020 to revert certain parcels of land to the fae but otherwise has not changed since its previous adjustment in 1799. Since then, occasional crime between fae and humans has still occurred, but at a low rate. Entering fae territory, however, remains significantly dangerous for humans.



## Fair Feasters

Fair feasters are a type of fae who feed on the energy, emotions, and blood of mortal creatures. Their name comes from the human term “fair folk,” an antiquated euphemism for fae in general. Fair feasters are unusual among fae in that they do not belong to any of the four elements, and also in that they are able to lie. To lure victims, they frequently wear an attractive glamour, though their true appearance is pale and corpse-like. They abhor sunlight and other bright light, fire, the flowers of St. John’s wort, and crowds, preferring to stay in darkness with no more than one other companion at a time. Though these conditions make it reasonably easy for humans to avoid or ward off fair feasters, these fae are still considered one of the most dangerous types in Eidolonia.



# THE QUICKSAND THEATRE COMPANY



## CHAPTER 1

VAI

I had my bag packed by the time Kwal's footsteps came down the corridor. Night had fallen, but I hadn't turned on a light. I sat on my bed, chilled and scared, wearing my shoes and coat, the zipped-up bag on my lap.

Kwal appeared in my doorway. "Vai," he said, soft and heavy.

I gave him a vague nod in greeting.

Kwal glanced around the dim room, then set himself to glowing, the pale green of bioluminescent fungi. He was a hob, a type of earth faery, stout and bulbous and four feet tall, and as familiar to me as my closest relatives. Dressed in his usual wrinkle-free sleeveless black kimono, the glow radiating from his bare arms and feet and head, he regarded me gravely.

"I'm sorry to put you in this position," I said.

"I understand why you did it. I even approve. But I'm bound to fulfill the deal."

I hugged the bag tighter. "Have you been to them all?"

Soft taps filled the silence, accelerating into a patter: raindrops hitting my windows. "I have, yes."

"So." I knew the next step, but I felt weak, immobile.

"You'd better go." Kwal sounded sorrowful. "Your mother will be home in twenty minutes, maybe sooner."

I roused my strength and stood, slinging the bag over my shoulder.

"Is there anything more you'd like to bring?" Kwal asked.

"Just this. I want to travel light."

Travel. Was that the word for what I'd be doing? I supposed so, if things went according to plan. My insides spiraled in anxiety as if I were falling.

"Where will you go?" Kwal asked as we walked down the corridor.

I tried not to look at each room we passed, each plant, each staircase, each framed picture, and not think about how it was the last time I'd see them in a year or more. Possibly the last time I would ever be in this house.

"I asked someone about a job," I said. "It would take me other places, around the island."

"Will you let me know when you're settled? I can't help you—I'm bound to that condition. But I would wish to know you're well."

"I will." We crossed the shining stone tiles of the foyer, and he opened the front door for me. The smell of rain on fallen leaves swept in. Bare branches, silhouetted against the twilight, raked the sky in a cold wind.

It was early November; Lord Festival was wrapping up. Any traveling festival performers would be moving on from our city tomorrow morning.

"Where you're going," Kwal said as I opened an umbrella, "is it somewhere you'll be safe?"

The lights lining our front walk gleamed in reflection on the wet pavers, beckoning me outward, like the foot-level aisle lights in a theatre.

"I'm not sure," I said. "But it's somewhere I wouldn't have the courage to go, if it weren't for this."



The caravans of the Quicksand Theatre Company stood in a ring on packed dirt and grass in Merrilo Park. Their windows made rectangles of light gleaming through the rain. Beats of music trailed from some. I counted thirteen vehicles in total, the biggest being two buses, the rest being trucks and caravans.

"Go to the one you'd most want to stay in and start asking there," the person had said two nights ago, when I'd asked about jobs. They'd been standing near the stage in the park, giving swift orders to performers going on and off, so I assumed them to be someone of authority in the troupe.

A few people hung around, sharing joints, laughing, wrapping their scarves tighter against the drizzle. They looked like fans, hopeful and nervous, not like folk who lived with the company. I ignored them and trudged along until reaching the caravan labeled LEONIDAS THE OBSTREPEROUS in winding yellow capitals.

*The one you'd most want to stay in.*

I studied it, umbrella held over me, rain dripping from its tips.

This might be a celebrity crush. I acknowledged that. A thrill did kick through me whenever Leonidas, bowing from stage, swept his black-lined eyes

across the audience and—I could have sworn—gave each of us our own personal smile as a thank-you gift. But he didn't know who I was, and I didn't truly know who he was. That fact stood at the center of my focus. Besides, he probably didn't count as a celebrity. Most Eidolonians were familiar with the Quicksand Theatre Company, but fewer could tell you the names of any performers in it.

What I mainly wanted was to understand. This feeling that came alive in me when he performed—every jubilant laugh, every despairing collapse to his knees, every salacious line—what was it? Why him more than other performers? How did he do it? What was it like to be him, and live in this thirty-foot-long teal-and-yellow vintage mobile home, and tour the country ceaselessly with the troupe?

These were questions I would never have had the courage to set out and explore with my family's eyes still on me. But as of tonight, under Kwal's spell, my family members didn't know I existed and wouldn't remember for another year. I needed somewhere else to be, something to do. So here I was, with my packed bag and a fluttering, undefined yearning in my heart.

I knocked on the lime-green door. If Leonidas had no use for me, which was entirely likely, I'd try one other caravan. Whichever looked friendliest. If that failed too, I'd catch the late train to Port Baleia, or Bahía Rosa. Or even pay a taxi to take me, despite the exorbitant cost of such a long ride. I just wanted to be far enough from Tesoro to avoid most of the fallout from the scandal.

No one answered. I knocked again. Raindrops ran steadily down the painted letters.

I should try another caravan. Or give up and take the train—no one in the theatre troupe was expecting me, nor did they need me. My feet, however, would not budge. *Please*, I thought with all my might toward the green door.

When no one answered my third knock, I waited ten more seconds, then set my hand on the door latch. I sensed spells on the vehicle—mainly against malicious fae or other harm-doers, but nothing I couldn't get past. A tiny push of magic was all it took. The latch opened. I folded my umbrella and stepped up into the caravan.

The interior was quiet, with only a Turkish lamp on, hanging from the ceiling at the front end, throwing a soft glow through its glass mosaic. I shut

the door and turned slowly in a circle, taking in the crammed-tight chaos of gilt, velvet, colors, and small compartments. The tiny kitchen was in the front, just behind the driver's seat. Flanking the central and only corridor, where I stood, were a couple of additional seats, jammed between cupboards and cabinets. The bathroom had a garish sunflower mural painted on its open door, and when I poked my head in, I found it smaller than any I had ever seen, a broom closet with water pipes. Past that were more cupboards and another seat. And across the caravan's back end hung a purple velvet curtain, probably concealing a bed. It was the likeliest place for Leonidas to be, if he was here.

I didn't dare approach it. "Hello?" I said, not very loudly.

Still no answer.

The rain rattled louder against the metal roof. My soul recoiled at the thought of going back out into that. Leonidas couldn't blame me for waiting until the worst of the storm passed. He probably wasn't even here. It was almost ten o'clock, but theatre people were often out late. Or so I'd heard. I would do no harm; I'd just sit quietly.

A skinny alcove by the door seemed to be a coat closet. I set my wet shoes there, beside a pair of mid-calf black leather boots with multiple sets of buckles. Above them hung a long black coat with more silver buttons than was practical, its silky red lining worn to shreds in spots. Coat and boots both held a lived-in type of wearing. I could see the shape of Leonidas's calves and forearms in the warp of the materials.

Still wearing my damp overcoat, I took one of the seats farther from the purple curtain and set my bag down. Warmth seeped pleasantly into my chilled socks. Leonidas apparently had heated floors. Settling back to wait, I took a deep breath and caught a hint of powdery cosmetics and the dusty-wood scent of theatres. It reminded me of my mother, a sensation both comforting and poignant.

The windows had teal curtains with gold tassels, drawn back, though I couldn't see much in the rainy night. Someone with light-colored hair strode past outside. A moment later, the driver's door opened and shut, sending a thump through my side of the vehicle. Heart pounding, I leaned forward to look up the corridor.

The driver was visible in profile under the dome light as they leaned to



check something on the dashboard. It was the light-haired person, with pale skin and almost invisible eyebrows. Not Leonidas.

I opened my mouth, then shut it. If the person looked back and saw me, I'd speak up. If not, I was allowed to just sit here, ride to the next city. That was the rule I decided on.

The driver faced forward again. The dome light switched off. The engine started up with a grumbling roar, making the caravan vibrate.

When I leaned back into my seat, I couldn't see the driver's rearview mirror, so they couldn't see me. I glanced toward what I assumed to be Leonidas's alcove, but he didn't emerge from his curtain. Perhaps he was riding with someone else. How should I know?

I was trembling. Somehow I had gone from loyal family member to whistblower to stowaway, in less than twelve hours. I'd become something bizarrely unlike my usual self. I really should alert the driver to my presence.

But. Going out into the cold rain. Trudging to a hotel not even a twenty-minute drive from my house. Or dragging myself to the train station and finding a hotel in a different city, at an even later hour, all the while wondering wistfully what might have happened if I'd stayed with the Quicksand Theatre Company, my only appealing escape plan—my one selfish goal, after having sacrificed so much of my life for the greater good.

I peeled off my damp coat and draped it around my front like a blanket. I found the seatbelt and fastened it. If stealing this ride made me outlandish, well, it had already been a day of outlandish things for me anyway.

We bumped forward over the grass, wheeling in an arc. The tires thumped onto pavement, and with a bass growl, we picked up speed.

Dark road curving, climbing. A couple of other caravans trundling along behind us, aglow with lights. Flashes of manicured landscaping and gated driveways. Then a half-minute of a view that made my heart ache: the skyline of Città del Tesoro, my hometown, glowing at the base of the hills, Art Deco buildings lit in warm whites, pale yellows, and watery blues.

Before I could locate our house on Argento Hill, roadside trees swept into my field of vision, and the city was gone. After a slope down, we joined the Great Eidolonian Highway. Since I was on the vehicle's left side, and outside my window was the sea rather than hills, we had to be going south. That matched

what I had looked up—Quicksand's next performance was on Punta Rosa.

It was no use wondering *Did I do the right thing?*, because it was done, right or not. Instead I tried to acclimate to my separation from my family. Though I was thirty-one, I had lived in my parents' house until tonight—mainly because the house was so large that it'd be a waste of space not to. I'd had several rooms to myself, adjoining the garden, and could easily go a whole day without seeing anyone.

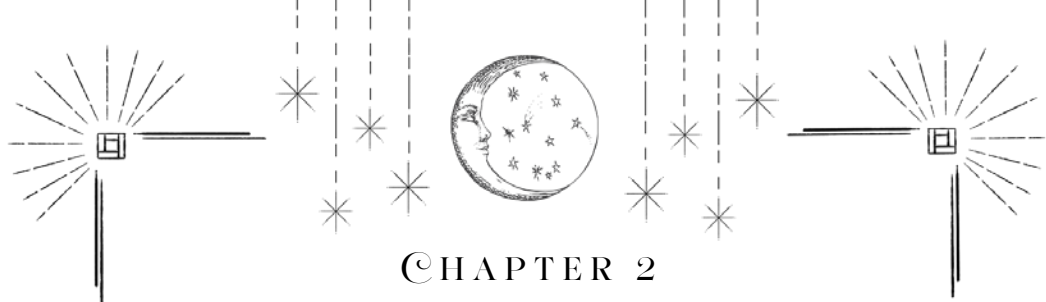
The house had often felt vast and lonely. I had set up folding screens around my desk, and around my bed, for coziness. Maybe that had been part of what drew me to the idea of a caravan. I wanted to tuck myself into a small space, drive it around the country, change the view outside my windows.

Tonight, having snuck into exactly such a caravan, the nomadic life struck me as unsettling. My family consumed my mind. My older sister, Daphne, in her downtown apartment. My mother at home with Kwal and perhaps a visiting friend to comfort her. My father and uncle almost certainly out on bail but warned not to leave the city as they awaited trial. All of them in a firestorm of stress. None remembering who I was nor knowing I had been the one who struck the match.

And I had fled to the sparkly junk drawer that was the caravan of Leonidas of the Quicksand Theatre Company. Without, so far, his knowledge.

I didn't know what he and the driver would do when they discovered me. I didn't know if the troupe would have any use for me. And I wasn't allowed to know the details of the devastation I had left behind in my family.

I resigned myself to, first, probably not getting any sleep tonight, and second, not knowing much about anything I was doing anymore, for the next year, starting now.



## CHAPTER 2

VAI

“They’re not a friend of yours?”

“I’ve never seen this person before. I would’ve asked you before allowing someone to stay.”

“Then where’d they come from?”

Sleep had not only arrived despite my expectations, but had crushed me under its weight. I struggled to open my eyelids, and finally succeeded.

Daylight. The caravan was parked. Two people were peering at me. One, the pale driver. The other, Leonidas.

At the moment he didn’t resemble the gleaming, colorful person I had admired on stage. He wore no makeup, morning scruff darkened his jaw, his black hair was a chaotic nest, and he had on plaid shorts and a gray sweatshirt with the sleeves ripped off. He lolled on the seat across from me, arms folded, cell phone in one hand.

“Hi!” he said with a theatrical type of brightness. “Who the hell are you?”

“I’m—I’m sorry.” I shoved upright from the slump I’d fallen into, cringing at the crick in my neck. “My name is Vai Delvecchio. I go by ‘they.’ I...didn’t mean to fall asleep.”

“Leo, Wayshaw.” Leonidas—Leo?—pointed respectively to himself, then to the slim, pale person. “He, she. Fantastic to meet you. You’re in my caravan because?”

“I knocked,” I promised. “Last night, in Tesoro. No one answered, so I came in, but then...it started driving away.” I was trembling. This was not how I had envisioned introducing myself to Leonidas.

The driver, Wayshaw, looked calmly at Leo. “You didn’t hear them knock?”

“I took one of Ayda’s sleep-like-the-dead herbs. I wasn’t going to hear a damn thing till morning. *You* didn’t hear them?”

“I must have been outside, readying the caravan to leave.”

“So you just sat there silently, getting a free ride to Punta Rosa,” Leo said

to me.

With a meek nod, I patted back my hair, some of which had stuck to my cheek overnight. “That wasn’t my plan. I was going to ask if I could work for the troupe. For free. Or rather, in exchange for lodging in the caravan. If there’s room.”

He tilted his head toward the coat closet. “And why would a person with Magnanni shoes and what appears to be a genuine fucking Prada raincoat”—his glance flicked to my coat—“want to live in this rattletrap?”

I curled my hand self-consciously around my coat collar. It had folded back as I slept, displaying the label.

They might as well know. They’d hear soon enough anyway, if they paid any attention to the news. “I found out some of my family members were aiding a politician in illegal activities, and I blew the whistle on them,” I said. “So I need a new job. Preferably outside of Tesoro.”

Leo’s expression went blank. “Which politician?”

“Walda Portnoff. Parliamentary representative for the greater Tesoro area.”

“You’re helping bring down Walda Portnoff?”

“It...appears so.”

Leo swiped a finger along his scruffy jaw. “Huh. May she crash hard, swiftly, and in flames. Okay. You can stay for the day and see what you think. Audition when you’re ready.”

“No, no.” My arm twitched, sending the coat slithering down my shins. “I don’t want to act. I’m...not a comedian, I’d be no good. I’m a matter-witch. I can do backstage work, keep things secure, or clean, or repaired.”

Leo glanced at Wayshaw, who shrugged. She was probably a faery in human form, to judge from the symmetrical face, pearly-smooth skin, and webbing between her fingers. “Troupe can always use that,” she remarked.

“Matter-witch,” Leo said. “*That’s* how you got in.”

“Security is one of my specialties,” I admitted.

“All right. Whatever. Splendid.” Leo rose and reached to a compartment above his seat. A twist of a handle, and the door folded down to reveal a flower-patterned mattress. A loft bed. “Yours for the time being if you want it.”

I looked at Wayshaw. “It isn’t yours?”

She looked mildly puzzled. “I’m fae. I don’t sleep.”

“Wayshaw dives into the nocturnal waters while the rest of us slumber,” Leo informed me. “Nor does she share my bed, for we are just friends.”

“I’m not the slightest bit interested,” Wayshaw agreed.

“So no one’s used this in a while.” Leo waved to the bunk.

I decided not to ask any further questions. They were being more generous than I had any right to expect. “Thank you. That will do fine.”

Leo thumbed at his phone screen. “I took a picture of you while you were asleep and sent it around to the company to see if anyone recognized you. They didn’t, but a few people said you’re hot, and they’ll take you if I don’t want you. So. You already have options.”



Wayshaw left to return to the ocean. Leo showered, put on his long black coat and boots, and told me, “If you’re planning to steal the caravan, be warned it’s a beast to drive. Good luck!” He went out as well.

I tottered into the kitchen for a drink of water and looked out the nearest window. Punta Rosa may have been mostly a scrub-covered piece of rock sticking into the sea, but any ocean vista is a stirring sight, and this point was particularly dramatic. Whitecaps crashed against the shore. Sea stacks dotted the ocean, foam ruffling white against their bases. Cliffs marched away, vanishing in the mist. Against this backdrop, Leo stalked like a Brontëan hero, coat flapping amid brown salt-grass. He descended below a line of boulders, and I lost sight of him.

The kitchen, meanwhile, was less inspiring. Tiny sink, stove, fridge, cupboards, all in need of cleaning, with counter space so minuscule it seemed impossible to prepare any significant quantity of food. People lived like this?

I caught that thought, labeled it snobbery or perhaps elitism, and reminded myself I didn’t get to invade someone’s home and then judge everything in it.

I took stock of the kitchen supplies. The corner cupboard didn’t have much food, nor did the fridge. I might as well take the initiative and be a generous guest—or volunteer worker, whichever I was—by buying breakfast.

From my phone’s map I learned we were in Nopal Park, and the nearby town, Bahía Rosa, had an online grocery that could deliver here. My order arrived within half an hour, carried by a sylph. By then I had taken a five-minute

shower in a stall so tiny it felt like being squeezed inside a wet sock, shaved to keep my face smooth, expelled water from my hair with magic, and put on a touch of plum eyeliner. Although Leo had not asked me to clean anything, he hadn't forbidden it either, so I gave a touch of magic to the discolored toilet bowl, soap-spotted sink, and smudgy mirror.

I hadn't packed many clothes. The blue-gray cashmere sweater I'd worn yesterday was my favorite, so I cleaned it with a skimming of magic and put it back on, along with yesterday's gray jeans.

I made tea, a dish of sliced Asian pears, and a pot of sweetened congee with chopped peanuts. Jammed into the kitchen window frame was a card with a composite of the faces of what looked to be everyone in the troupe, each making an absurd expression. I plucked it out. The inside was covered with signatures. A lot of *Happy birthday, Leo!* and similar messages. One said *35! You'll have to impart to me some of your ancient wisdom. xoxo, Fred.*

I put the card back. Assuming this birthday was recent, Leonidas was four years older than me. He also seemed to go by "Leo" to everybody. Perhaps "Leonidas" was just for playbills and the sides of caravans.

As I ladled congee into a bowl, he returned. I swallowed hard enough to feel a click in my throat. After leaving his boots and coat in the closet, he came into the kitchen, blowing on his knuckles to warm them.

I lifted the tin of Mao Jian. "Tea?"

He squinted at it. "Hmm. Not enough caffeine. I'll make coffee."

Having found a near-empty bag of dark-roast beans in the pantry, I had forecast this possibility and put coffee in my grocery order too. I held out the new bag.

Leo took it, unrolled the top, and sniffed. The furrow left his forehead. He hummed a note in interest. The kitchen table was a slab sticking out from the wall with two chairs under it. I took my tea and congee there to give him room at the stove to brew coffee. He did so, his movements precise. Now that he was properly awake and put together, I could see I hadn't been mistaken about his attractiveness. I couldn't decide which feature I liked best: his eyes, bold and striking even without eyeliner, or his full and mobile mouth.

With his mug, he sat opposite me. His legs were long, like mine, and as he swung them under the table our knees knocked together. Sipping coffee,

bundled in an oversized red-and-black-striped sweater, he watched me as if I was auditioning. Which I supposed I was, in a sense.

“Vai,” he said, elongating the word as if trying out its taste.

“Leo,” I said in return.

His mouth quirked up in amusement. He plucked out a pear slice from the dish and ate it. “You’re very quiet, compared to most who sneak into our caravans.”

“I am quiet generally.”

“You really just wanted to get out of Tesoro.”

“I did.”

“Then...you’re not looking for a hookup? I’m not, either. Just figured we should establish that.”

I shook my head swiftly. Celebrity crush notwithstanding, seducing him had not been my goal. “No. I’m just...curious about the troupe.”

“And now that you’ve seen how unsophisticated it is”—he took another pear slice and waved it in a circle to refer to the caravan or possibly the whole troupe—“are you planning on hopping off in Bahía Rosa?”

“You seem to have heated floors. That’s at least somewhat sophisticated.”

He snorted a laugh and ate the pear.

“But,” I added, “I’ll get off in Bahía Rosa if you prefer. Feel free to have some congee.”

Leo studied me. “Why Quicksand? Why my caravan?”

I set my spoon down as I assembled my answer. “I’ve seen Quicksand perform every time you’ve come to Tesoro for the last seven years. I always find you one of the most interesting actors. I rarely perform at all, except with festival groups, like everyone, and it seems incredibly brave to me. At your performance last Tuesday, someone I was with said, ‘The likes of you and I could never be like that, could we?’ And that’s when I knew. This is where I would go, when I reported my family.”

Leo leaned back, cradling his mug. “You wanted to prove that person wrong.”

“He doesn’t know where I am, so not that, really.” Although in my own heart, yes, that. “But I wanted to learn what it’s like. To travel with you all. Work on performances.”



He hummed in acceptance, squinted out the window, and downed the rest of his coffee. Then he got up and scooped congee into a bowl. He grabbed cinnamon out of a drawer, scattered some in, and stirred it. Wandering past the table, he ate a bite.

Since he seemed about to leave without another word, I said, "Leo."

He turned expectantly, sucking on the spoon.

"Why didn't you kick me out when you found me?" I asked.

He ate another spoonful. "You don't look particularly dangerous. If anything, you looked like you needed protecting. But mainly, I detest Walda Portnoff, so if you're getting her arrested, I approve of you."

"Fair. Thank you."

"Your story's intriguing," he added. "Not that I know much of it." He looked me in the eyes, and I could hear the unspoken word: *Yet*.

I lowered my gaze. "It's all still unfolding. I'm sure everyone will hear eventually."

"This congee is actually *good*. I don't even like congee usually. Did you use magic on it?"

"Only a little, to ensure the right texture. I like things to be done correctly."

"Stay a while if you want. Use your skills to make things more correct around here." With a nod, he spooned more congee into his mouth and walked off with his bowl.



When Wayshaw returned, she inspected the pantry, then the fridge. "You obtained groceries?"

I rinsed the pot in the sink. "I took the liberty, yes."

"These foods look healthful. Best of luck in getting Leo to eat them."

"He did eat some congee and said he liked it."

"I did eat it and liked it!" Leo shouted from the other end of the caravan.

We ignored him.

"Were you swimming?" I guessed. Not because she was wet—she did not appear to be—but because swimming seemed a likely activity for a water faery at the ocean.

"Yes. Visiting some of my folk."

“Which do you belong to?” When a faery took human form, you couldn’t always tell what they might be in their original state. Wayshaw looked like a person with neat, short sand-colored hair and an immaculate gray suit.

“I’m of the merfolk,” she said. “And your people?”

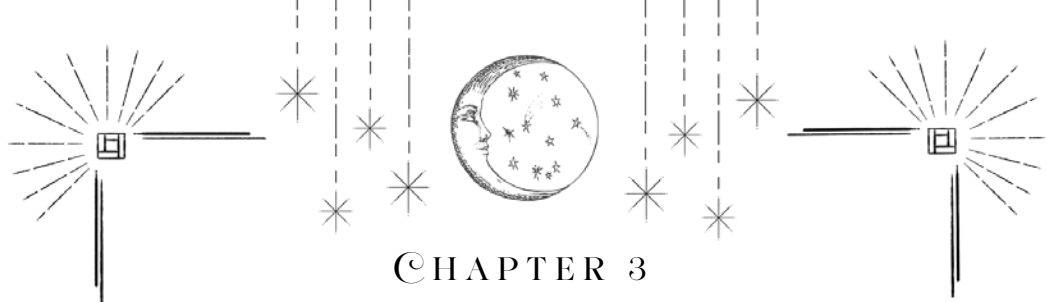
“We’re from Tesoro. If you mean my ancestors, the largest portions in my mix are Italian and Chinese. One great-grandparent was an air faery.”

That ancestor had been the inspiration for the name of our family business, Airtight Spells. A name that was probably all over the news today.

My stomach whirled as if I had stepped off a high-dive. I hadn’t dared look online yet, but it was time. With a flick of magic I expelled the water from the damp dishtowel into the sink and murmured that I was going for a walk.

Leo was leaning against a cupboard, tapping at his phone. As I put on my coat and shoes, he slid his glance to me. Veiled, unreadable. Perhaps looking me up online. Finding my family in the news.

Couldn’t blame him. I was about to do the same. I nodded to him and went out.



## LEO

Did I run a search on Vai's name and the word "whistleblower" in Tesoro's local news, two minutes after leaving this stranger alone in my caravan? Of course. Who wouldn't wonder at such an apparition?

This Vai. With forlorn rosebud lips and sleek bobbed hair and a designer wardrobe. Why did they choose my caravan as an escape pod, and what did they intend to do at Quicksand? My news search couldn't answer that, but it did back up their story.

*Airtight Spells Owners Arrested.* A man and his brother—Marcello and Giovanni Delvecchio—were charged with bribery and money laundering, having allegedly aided Member of Parliament Walda Portnoff in committing electoral fraud and the covering up thereof.

The charges didn't surprise me. Politicians and rich businesspeople were always miring themselves in shit like that. But I felt a pang for Vai, who seemed honestly shaken.

The article went on to report that Airtight Spells had operated for over thirty years with a pristine reputation till now. They were matter-witches specializing in document security: making things unreadable to anyone except the client. Good deal if you were paranoid about your personal info—or if you were committing crimes.

Stupid, the things people will do for money. There are so many better reasons to do stupid things.

The article said a whistleblower—name withheld per protection law, but presumably Vai—had discovered the contents of Portnoff's documents and reported them to the authorities.

Being the innocent in a rich family who had fucked up and landed themselves in handcuffs: was that better or worse than being the fuckup in a well-behaved middle-class family, like me? Hard to say.

I did know, however, that I abominated Walda Portnoff. Execrated her. She

was a member of the unctuously named Humanist Party, which stood, supposedly, for the protection of innocent humans. But Portnoff called fae “glowing lumps of slime” who should be sent back to “the volcanic crevices they slithered out of.”

She had called ordinary witches, who made up half the human populace, “toxic dangers, disasters waiting to happen.” As a witch myself, I was a disaster who was constantly already happening, thank you very much, but I wouldn’t slap that label on my magical friends.

And regarding the fae territory encompassing the entire interior of the island, Portnoff was in favor of pushing back the verge to gain more land for humans. Which was not just stupid but apocalyptic.

I had solid reasons to resent certain of the fae. But this rhetoric was psychotic. To hear the Humanist Party tell it, Eidolonian humans had been languishing in oubliettes, getting whipped by fae and witches, for the last three hundred years, rather than essentially flourishing and mixing with our fae friends just fine.

Lately, scads of Humanist Party members had been arrested. But since their crimes were often concealed via artful magic (oh, the hypocrisy), it was taking the law a while to ferret all of them out. So if Vai Delvecchio was a voluntary instrument in Portnoff’s downfall, then Vai was welcome in my caravan.

Having verified that, I put down my phone, lifted my sweater, and examined my newest tattoo, stinging as it healed under its enchanted clear bandage. A chain of stars, points touching, meandered from the red footbridge on my shoulder to the inkwell-and-quill above my hipbone, linking them up. Another step in my plan to save myself. And if this and the other tricks in my bag didn’t work...

Well, at least my friends would see I had tried.

#### VAI

Kwal’s spell affected only my parents, sister, and uncle. Everyone else still knew who I was. Therefore my phone had accumulated a storm of text messages—innocent clients, a neighbor, a friend from college, a cousin—all asking some form of *What’s going on, Vai?*

As I trudged down the beach, I copied and pasted the same wording to each: I myself was not being charged, but otherwise I shouldn’t talk about it yet,

and Kwal could answer anything business related. I ignored their responses—frustration from the clients, consolation from everyone else—and checked in with Kwal.

*I have a safe place to stay for now, I texted. Are the lawyers and investigators dealing with everyone who's asking the family about me?*

Yes, Kwal answered after a few minutes. *They know about the spell. Where possible, I'm answering people's messages to your family myself to explain it. I expect word will get out soon and they will cease to bother you or ask after you.*

I pictured texts piling up on my sister's phone, and our parents' and uncle's, asking *Was Vai the whistleblower?* And my family members' minds failing to latch on to the question, sliding away, moving to the next of their concerns. Not even wondering what my name meant.

I thanked Kwal, braced myself, then went online and found the article. My chest squeezed tight as I read it, hunched on a driftwood log. Dad and Uncle Joe were out on bail, and their lawyer was not issuing comments at this time. June Xian (Mom) and Daphne Xian (my sister), though they had never been employed at Airtight, had agreed to be questioned under a truth spell and were found to have no knowledge of the illegal activity.

I released a breath of relief. I hadn't been sure.

Walda Portnoff, meanwhile, had been arrested. So at least I had accomplished my central goal.

I dared look at the comments on the article for half a minute.

The first: *Shocking. Such a respected family.*

Second: *Politics in this country has gotten disgusting. Now even the Delvecchios are sullying themselves. It's enough to make me want to move out of this province.*

Third: *I went to school with Daphne and her sibling. She was always sweet. I assume it's the sib who was the whistleblower. Talk about a rule follower. Ice chips wouldn't melt in that kid's mouth.*

I shut the browser and took careful breaths of ocean wind until I no longer felt like I might throw up. Then I walked down the beach until I could only see the troupe's vehicles as tiny blocks of faraway color. By the time I came back, my cheeks and fingers felt raw with the November wind.

Pausing outside Leo's caravan, I touched the exterior. The yellow paint was rough with texture: dried St. John's wort flowers, hundreds of them encased in

the pigment. It was common sense on Eidolonia to carry the flower, dried or fresh, if walking alone at night. They repelled fair feasters. There had been a couple of deaths recently, people found lifeless next to the verge, drained of energy and also some of their blood, in the telltale manner of a fair feaster attack. If you stayed in cities, among lights and crowds, you weren't in danger of falling prey to them. But I supposed caravan owners, who often parked overnight in dark, rural locations like this one, would have incentive to ward them off.

I knocked on the caravan's door.

Leo let me in. "Vai Delvecchio," he said. "Nice walk?"

I nodded. In the wake of that article, I didn't feel up to further discussion.

"Matter-witches always have plenty to do around the troupe," he added after a few seconds of silence. "I can show you around, get you started with a task or two."

It was much kinder than interrogating me. And since I couldn't very well answer, *I'd rather just lie in your caravan and stare at the wall for a while if that's all right*, I nodded. "Thank you."

More people were out of their caravans now that it was midday. Some sat on the steps of their vehicles, sipping from mugs, while others rehearsed lines or assembled what I assumed to be set pieces. Leo sauntered down the row with me, rattling off names. Some I recognized from Quicksand's programs, but he listed too many for my tired memory to retain this morning.

Costume department was a bus festooned with rhinestones. Props and scenery was a box truck decorated with a pink-and-black geometric pattern. Lighting and effects was a bus painted with green sea serpents, and apparently was also the abode of the actor Shelini Saru—one of the names I recognized—and her fire-faery lover.

"Ideal to have a fire faery to help with lights and explosions, if you can get one," Leo remarked.

"How many people are in the troupe?" I asked.

"Twenty-five at the moment. Eighteen humans, six fae. Handful of others, here and there, who join sometimes for a season, then hop off again."

"How many of the humans are witches?"

Leo tallied on his fingers, his gaze flicking down the crescent of caravans. "Ten. Exo-witches like me are overrepresented. There are five of us. Only three

matter-witches, though, so you'll be valuable. For the whole day or two you can put up with us."

"Surely it's a matter of how long you can put up with *me*."

"Ha. It would take effort on your part to be more insufferable than the average person here. You'll see."

"Then I'll start by asking the costume manager for tasks. When do you have dinner? I'll cook something."

"Oh, you don't have to," he said. "I usually just heat up a pack of ramen."

I gazed at him for several seconds. *Don't judge*, I reminded myself again. Nonetheless, my mouth stepped ahead of me and said, "I will cook something better than a pack of ramen."

Leo burst into laughter and swung his long coat so the hem swatted me. "The disdain! Your face! All right then, seven o'clock, how's that?"



Leo introduced me to Mathilde, the costume monarch, then left with some others to prepare the venue in Bahía Rosa. Mathilde was about my mother's age but otherwise different from her in nearly every aspect: stout instead of willowy, hair messy and purple instead of arranged in a silver chignon, flannel shirt and work jeans instead of Chanel.

Mathilde dumped a pile of mud-splattered costumes into my arms and requested that I clean them. I recognized the clothes from the performance in the park a few nights earlier. Sitting on a padded bench in her bus, I expelled the mud, sweat, and grime from the first five costumes, then brought them to her.

She lifted her head from the lime-green dress whose stitches she was letting out and held one of the costumes into the light. "Nice. Full dry-clean. Didn't even fade the colors."

"Preservation was one of my tasks at my previous job."

"Do the whole stack if you have the energy. Then hang 'em on the end of that rack, would you?"

As I got to work de-mudding a gown in marigold shades of red and yellow, I asked, "Is the venue outdoors here too?"

"Nope." She tapped her fingertips along the dress's edge, creating a new hem without a needle. A matter-witch, then, like me. "We get a theatre here, thank



gods. In frickin' November, it's much better than performing in rain and mud."

Recalling the performers who had done handsprings down the center aisle—thus the costumes with mud on the arms as well as the legs—I asked Mathilde how many could do gymnastics. "Just four," she said. "Kornelia, Fred, Xiu, Maki. Everyone associates Quicksand with the tumblers, but most of us can't do that shit and would rather not break our wrists trying."

Since she'd said "us," I asked whether everyone performed, even the people—like her—who specialized in backstage tasks.

"Oh sure. At least sometimes. They always need extras. We get roped in."

I wondered how long I could avoid being put on stage. Maybe someday I'd be interested, but my bravery was absolutely tapped for this month.

I grew tired pouring energy into the costumes. They were larger than the documents I'd usually worked with at Airtight, and there were lots. Eventually Mathilde noticed me yawning and sent me off to rest. I returned to Leo's caravan, found it unlocked but empty, and climbed up to my bunk. There I discovered that the loft bed seemed sized for a child, or possibly a gnome. As I'm six feet tall, I had to draw up my knees in order to fit my legs, and when lying on my back, that brought them almost in contact with the vehicle's ceiling. Which was painted shiny gold. In part despair and part amusement, I turned onto my side, knees bent. It was comfortable enough, and I was exhausted enough, to fall asleep that way.

I dozed for forty-five minutes, having set a timer on my phone to awaken me. Any longer than that and I would damage my ability to sleep tonight.

By six o'clock it was getting dark and the rain was tapping again on the caravan's roof. Gusts of wind made the vehicle shudder. I got to work cooking a risotto. It was an easy dish, not actually much more complex than a pack of ramen, but healthier and tastier. The smell of the saffron, white wine, and mushrooms made my heart ache. Daphne and Uncle Joe teased each other in my memory, joking about which of them cooked Italian food better.

My appetite waned. Nonetheless, I opened a loaf of bread and put together a side salad of greens with sliced fennel bulb and orange. I was shaking up the vinaigrette when Leo got back. Wayshaw hopped in after him and flicked the rain off both of them with a shimmer of magic.

"Holy shit, Vai," Leo said, shucking his coat. "It smells amazing in here." He came into the small kitchen, wafting the alluring smell of someone who's had

cold wind blowing through their hair. He grabbed a slice of bread, dipped it in the dish of olive oil and balsamic I had made, and moaned in pleasure as he chewed it. “I’m starving. This is ambrosial.”

Gratified, I handed Wayshaw a plate, though I wasn’t sure how we would all fit at the one tiny table. It didn’t matter; the two of them could eat first.

She said, “I’m interested only in the salad, thank you,” and calmly served herself some. After declining the dressing, she took the plate and sat in the seat under the Turkish lamp. She opened a book on the seat’s arm and began munching undressed salad while she read.

Returning my attention to the kitchen table, I found Leo sitting there, gazing at the votive candle burning in a pink glass holder. I had discovered the candle in a drawer, along with a lighter. He blinked at me, his forehead wrinkled. “This is all really nice. You don’t have to do this every night, okay? You *can’t*, actually.”

“It’s not that much,” I said, confused.

He laughed. “Pack of ramen, remember? We have performances most nights. This time Thursday, we’ll be at the theatre in Bahía Rosa getting make-up on and won’t be back here till like eleven.”

“Then we can have dinner at eleven. Or before the show.” I set out plates and silverware.

Leo spooned risotto onto his plate. “I’m just saying, save your energy for helping the troupe, not for making me dinner.”

“It’s dinner for all three of us, and it’s just cooking.” I sat and handed him one of the faded cloth napkins I’d found in the drawer.

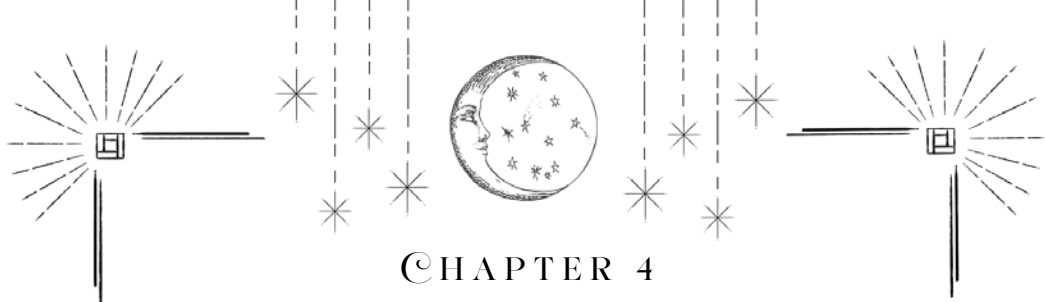
Leo already had his mouth stuffed with risotto. “This is *so good*,” he mumbled around it.

After dinner I got ready for bed, climbed into my bunk, and tucked myself under the sheet and blanket Leo had given me. My eyelids felt heavy. Even in a new space and with my knees bent, I could tell I would sleep better tonight.

I was already drifting when I heard the rustle of someone passing, then a pause. Leo said softly, “Thanks for cooking today.”

“You’re welcome,” I whispered, rolling over, but he had already shut himself into the bathroom and was turning on the water.

I nuzzled my nose into the pillowcase, wrapped the blanket around myself, and collapsed into sleep.



## CHAPTER 4

LEO

There was a text from Ayda waiting when I got out of the shower.  
*I still can't forgive you.*

I settled onto the padded trunk next to my bed. Wayshaw had gone out to spend the night dolphining through the waves with her folk. Everything in the caravan was dark except for the Turkish lamp I kept on as a nightlight, and the low lights from the rest of the troupe's vehicles filtering around the edges of my curtains.

*At least you're talking to me again, I typed back. That was a harsh week of ghosting, friend.*

*Serves you right, she said.*

A minute passed. I got fidgety, fearing this was all she would say.

*I'm sorry I didn't consult you first, I finally added. But you wouldn't have let me do it.*

*OF COURSE I WOULDN'T. Why do you think I'm upset.*

*It'll be okay, I wrote. I'm collecting a bag of tricks. Also I have an idea with my tattoos: I'm getting them linked up with extra designs so a protection spell can be put into them all at once. Like a shield around my whole body. Well not my face. Probably won't tattoo that. Or I could actually, with invisible ink.*

*Ayda took another minute to answer. You know you cannot count on any of that. And even if you can... Fuck, Leo. Think what a horrible year it'll be.*

*I don't know, couldn't be worse than performing during summer season when everyone smells like a bag of sweaty crotch.*

*She had no response to my hilarious imagery.*

*You can't be flippant forever, she eventually said.*

*I've gotten through hard things before, I wrote. Anyway, you'll send me chanta-grams, right? We made Nalibak agree to that part, so you'd better.*

*Of course. Gods. Stop making me cry.*

*I'm sorry. I meant to help. I'm giving this to you and Javier as a gift. Which I*

*know sounds ghastly but can you also accept how it makes your lives better?*

*I'm trying. But this was so so stupid Leo.*

*What in our 20 years together as BFFs led you to expect smart decisions from me?*

I got a *Ha* again. Then she asked about the troupe's upcoming performances, and we chatted about that, and about Javier. We ended up saying goodnight on civil terms—an enormous comfort. But now I couldn't sleep.

At 3:00 a.m., I got up and tiptoed past Vai to the kitchen for a drink of water. I slumped into a kitchen chair, leaned my forehead on the windowpane, and stared toward the ocean.

After some time, a wraith wafted into view: Vai, reflected in the glass, wearing white T-shirt and drapey yoga pants.

"Are you all right?" they asked.

I tipped my empty glass back and forth on the table. "Just pondering rash decisions I've made. As one does at this hour."

Vai padded closer, arms folded. "I suppose one does."

Vai's dramatic break from their family shifted back into my thoughts. Something like that would give a person sleepless nights for sure.

"I won't ask you for details," I said, the words emerging without my having sanctioned them. Insomnia could do that to me. "I just have one question."

Vai watched me, looking vulnerable in the simple T-shirt, eyeliner washed off, hair tucked behind their ears.

"If anyone comes looking for you," I said, "should I tell them you're not here and I've never heard of you?"

"Oh. I don't think it'll be a problem. The investigators and the prosecutor have my number. And my family...won't be reaching out. If you mean anyone else, coming for me out of revenge..." Vai tucked their lower lip into their teeth in thought. "I don't think anyone involved is *that* horrible."

"But in case they are, then yes, I'll check with you before giving out information. And I'll ask the whole troupe to do the same."

Vai released a sigh. "If anyone gives you trouble, I'll leave. I promise."

I swatted the idea away with a flutter of my fingers. "No trouble. We get weirdos approaching us all the time. I'm just asking your preferences."

"It isn't fair of me to put you in danger."

Given what I'd brought down on myself with Nalibak, I actually laughed a bit. "I assure you, you're not the biggest source of danger in my life."

Vai nodded, though didn't look convinced. "You're all right, then? I bought some herbal teas. If you don't feel well..."

"I don't need anything. Thanks. I'll go back to bed if you will, okay?" I put down the glass and stood.

"Okay." A smile graced their lips. A pretty sight, turning the fashion mannequin into a darling human for a moment.

"Why are you so sure your family won't reach out?" I asked before Vai could turn away. "I know, I know, I said I wouldn't ask anything else. I just. You know what, never mind, forget I asked. Go to bed, it's okay."

Looking thoughtful, Vai stood up straighter. "We have this good friend, Kwal, an earth faery—a hob. He's worked with our family since I was a child. He takes care of lots of things for us, personal and business, and we've always made sure he's set up comfortably in the human realm. Part of the guarantee that Airtight offers is backed up by a deal we made with him. If any of us break confidentiality in our clients' contracts, Kwal will enact a spell that makes it so the rest of the family does not—cannot—know or remember the offending party for one year."

"Oh." The word slipped out as a sigh. "So...they don't know you're the whistleblower?"

"They don't even know who I am. And won't, for another year. My parents, my uncle, my sister."

The reasons behind Vai's night flight from Tesoro became clearer. "Total banishment. That's brutal."

"I knew the deal. I did it anyway." Vai's mouth twisted wryly. "Rash decisions one has made."

"Has this deal been enacted before? Anyone else ever triggered it and gotten..." I twirled my finger. "Nullified for a year?"

"No. This is the first time."

While I searched my brain for some appropriate theatrical quotation in praise of immense integrity, Vai murmured goodnight and returned to bed. And, since I had promised to, I did the same.

## VAI

In the middle of the next day, during lunch break at the theatre in Bahía Rosa, I received a text.

*Oh Vai, I can't imagine how hard this is for you. I've been to see Daphne. She's shaken of course, but strong and gracious and going about her day. I thought you'd want to know she's doing all right.*

The message was from Charles Christopher, the friend of Daphne's who had commiserated to me that "the likes of you and I could never be like that" when we were watching the troupe. His fawning, lowly demeanor sometimes annoyed me, though I could not point to anything precisely he had done wrong. I felt guilty whenever I caught myself thinking less of him, because he was not only Daphne's friend but a crosswater, an immigrant from the U.S., and I didn't wish to be a nationalistic snob.

His message today was a relief. I did want to hear about Daphne.

*Thank you, I texted back. I miss her. I'm sorry to have caused trouble.*

*Hey, you didn't cause it, you just found out about it, he said. You're an honest person, I admire that.*

*I know you've gotten along well with my father and Uncle Joe, I added. I expect it's a shock for you too.*

Daphne had been the one to bring Charles to Eidolonia. She'd met him in America ten years ago, when she'd taken a sabbatical, rented a car, and gone exploring deep into the continent. She'd decided he needed rescuing from his depressing small town, and he had enthusiastically agreed. My family welcomed him with warmth. My parents and uncle delighted in his awe at the magical country he hadn't known existed, and they took pleasure in helping establish him as a citizen. I had been more reserved in my interactions with Charles, as I tended to be with everyone. Still, he had expressed appreciation for me, calling me "so calm and relaxing to be around."

*A shock for sure, he answered. But your family's always been good to me, and anyway as an outsider I'm probably not getting the nuances of the politics! I still view you all as friends and don't want to burn any bridges.*

*That's kind of you, I said.*

*Are you still in town? We could meet up for coffee if you want to talk.*

*I'm not in Tesoro anymore, no.* I hesitated, tempted to tell him I had landed myself a bunk in the home of the beautiful and cantankerous Leonidas. But I only said, *I found a place to stay for now. I expect I'll be moving around a fair amount for the next year.*

OK. *Let me know when you're back in Tesoro. My door's always open.* He added a heart emoji.

I thanked him again and picked up my pasta salad. I was having lunch in the theatre's lobby, as there was no eating allowed in the house or onstage. The lobby had faded carpet, old wooden benches, and a ticket window trimmed with shabby gold paint.

The house door stood open, so I wandered over and studied the backdrop from a distance. Between festivals, the troupe often put on comedic plays. Here and in a few more towns, they would be performing *Peter Pan Goes Wrong*. My job today was the backdrop: pink striped wallpaper for the Darling children's nursery. I'd gotten three-quarters of it up.

As I assessed the wallpaper, Leo and Fred, an attractive endo-witch, walked out on stage, carrying a bunk bed frame, and set it under the backdrop's window. Both were in costume, Fred as Peter Pan, and Leo as his shadow in all-black bodysuit.

As I watched, munching pasta, someone fit Fred into a flying harness, trailing overhead wires. Then Fred spoke his lines, and Leo shadowed him, sometimes smacking Fred in the head as he mirrored Fred's arm gestures. Fred lurched into the air via the wires, toppled halfway over, and flailed to a perch on the windowsill. Leo, unwired, scrambled up the bunk bed to the sill—the shadow trying to keep up. When Fred flew back to the floor, Leo windmilled his arms and fell backward from the window. My heart jumped in alarm—but of course every ungainly step of their performance was intentional, and a second later, he popped up grinning to give a thumbs-up to the director in the front row.

The director, Genevieve, was in their sixties, and was the person I had spoken to in the park in Tesoro, who'd told me to pick the caravan I'd most want to live in.

"Good!" they called. "Let's run it again."

I finished my lunch that way, watching rehearsal from the back of the house. Not until I had returned to the stage, carrying the last sections of wallpaper, did I realize I had gone nearly half an hour without thinking of my family.