

Spring 2023

The Curious Findings of Claudia Finch

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Recommended Citation

Sidley, Melissa Meilin, "The Curious Findings of Claudia Finch" (2023). *Senior Projects Spring 2023*. 157.
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The Curious Findings of Claudia Finch

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
Melissa Sidley

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2023

To G & G

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to extend my immense thanks and gratitude to my Senior Project advisor, Dominique Townsend. Thank you for your endless support and encouragement throughout this entire journey from beginning to end. I entered my senior year excited but apprehensive at the idea of writing my first novella, and when my confidence in myself and my writing abilities faltered, you were always there to remind me of my strengths and motivate me to keep pushing forward. Thank you for your kindness, your wisdom, and your comforting presence; I always left our weekly meetings with a smile on my face and warmth in my heart. I am deeply honored to have been able to work with you and thank you again for helping me write the story that I have always wanted to tell.

To my family, thank you for sparking my love for storytelling and writing. For all the museum trips, the library visits to check out books on ancient civilizations, for introducing me to the world of adventure stories. For all the books that you have given me, for all the stories that you have told, for the many hours you sat with me as I professed my love for them. Thank you for indulging my childhood dream of becoming an archaeologist. I am so thankful to have your unwavering love and support, especially in my writing endeavors, no matter how big or small the project. Thank you for continuously encouraging me to use my imagination and see the world as a realm of stories.

To Maddy Erke, this is for you. By chance, we met in Fiction Workshop, two aspiring writers with a shared love for fantasy, adventure, and cats. Over the course of these four years, you have been an amazing writing companion and cherished friend of mine. Thank you for your unconditional love and support, your sense of humor that never fails to cheer me up, and your devotion and assistance with this project. I cannot thank you enough for all the phone calls and text messages of encouragement and motivation. Thank you for being such a constant enthusiast and anchor of support in my writing journey, and while I did write Claudia Finch for myself, I also wrote it for you. And, I'd like to believe that the cosmos looked at us and said, "Them."

Finally, to everyone, friends, family, and teachers alike, that has offered me support, encouragement, and enthusiasm, thank you very much. I could not have gotten here without you.

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Chapter 1

Claudia Finch was not enjoying herself. Not in the slightest. Rather than being surrounded by old tomes and maps of ruins, holding worn leather journals filled with half-translated ancient script in her hands, she was crammed inside the Penrose Lounge where lace gloves and linen suits, and the smell of cigarette smoke made the already stifling room all the more suffocating.

That morning, she had received a notice from Professor Breckenworth that her package would be delivered in the afternoon with a postscript apologizing for the delay; there had been a mistake at the Archives. A newly-hired clerk had read the numbers incorrectly on the request form and thus, recalled the wrong items. Brimming with anticipation and envisioning a lovely day of reading, Claudia had refolded the small piece of paper before hastily standing up to excuse herself from the drawing room. At the gesture, her mother's perfectly painted lips turned down, disappointment etched ever so elegantly on her face.

"Now Claudia," Katherine Finch had said, "where do you think you're going? I do hope it's not because you find that professor's note more important than entertaining our guests?" she added, the fingers delicately holding her teacup flicking subtly towards the three other women seated in the room.

To be perfectly honest, Claudia would have found just about anything more important than sitting for hours and sipping tea—she didn't even like tea. Today's was supposedly some imported blend her mother had deemed exotic enough for her "cultured" palette. Claudia suspected that if she took a handful of leaves from the yard, steeped them and said it was Dicentra tea harvested from the coveted trees that grow at the peak of the Dicentra mountain, her

mother would believe her. And though all of the women, her mother included, were married to senior board members of the Hawthorne Historical Society, their conversations were always filled with the latest gossip on the city's elite. On top of it all, much to Claudia's annoyance and dismay, the topic for today's was focused solely on two facts: the first being that Maxwell Hawthorne, the youngest son of Edmund Hawthorne was an eligible bachelor, and the other being that Katherine Finch felt it was time that her daughter begin considering marriage.

Under her mother's expectant gaze, Claudia cringed, but caught herself as she saw the corners of the woman's mouth pull down further. She played with the paper, bending it back and forth with the edge of her nail, matching it to the rhythm of the jazz tune coming from the gramophone before conjuring up a response that would please her.

"Of course not, Mother. It's nothing." She shoved the notice into a pocket hidden within the folds of her dark blue walking skirt. "I didn't mean to offend our guests. It's just that--"

"Well then, if it's nothing, why don't you sit back down?"

Claudia considered negotiating, but by now, the talk amongst the three women had quieted, their eyes flitting between her and her mother as if it were a particularly exciting tennis match. Just as she was about to relent, there was a sudden rapt on the door of the drawing room.

"Yes?" her mother said.

"Telephone call for you, Ma'am," answered the housemaid.

"From who?"

"Mrs. Hawthorne. She said you'll be pleased to hear what she has to say."

Her mother was gone for no more than five minutes, but when she returned, her vermilion lips formed a triumphant smile.

“What did Mrs. Hawthorne want?” Claudia dared to ask as her mother sank gracefully back in her chair.

“It would seem,” she began, eyes glimmering, “that Mrs. Hawthorne feels it is of the utmost importance that her son find a suitable woman, and she has so graciously told me that you would be a good match for him.” Claudia’s nostrils flared. A suitable woman for him. This was idiotic. Her mother’s voice continued on, “So, this afternoon, you will have lunch with the young Mister Hawthorne at the Penrose Lounge, since you did say that you had nothing of *importance* to do.”

“And I have no say in this? Whether or not I feel as though *Mr. Hawthorne*,” Claudia huffed in indignation, “is a good match for me? Whether I want to marry at all?”

Her mother pinned her with a stare. “Oh, don’t be so melodramatic, Claudia. We’re not carting you off to a complete stranger.” Claudia’s retort simmered on her tongue. She and Maxwell Hawthorne were not close by any means, only cordial exchanges at the charity dinner each year, and the mutual acknowledgement that their respective families were heavily involved in the Historical Society, but her mother was right, he wasn’t a complete stranger.

One of the women gave her a simpering look and said, “Would it be so bad to dine with him, Claudia? He’s so handsome, even if he does spend all his time inside those dusty libraries.” Claudia repressed the urge to snort and ask why, if he was indeed so *achingly* handsome, the woman didn’t pursue him herself.

Resting her chin on the back of her manicured hand, her mother gave a sigh, “There, books. At least you’ll have one thing to talk to him about.” Claudia thought of her package that was coming this afternoon, mood souring considerably now that she knew she wouldn’t be there to receive it.

She didn't care how handsome or well-read Maxwell Hawthorne was, she wasn't interested. Even as a girl, she had never felt romantically inclined towards anyone. Her school friends and mother alike assured her it was a phase she'd grow out of; that it was a feeling, a yearning, a type of attraction that she'd develop an appreciation for once she got older, but now, just a couple weeks shy of her twenty-first birthday, Claudia knew that it was never a phase, it was just who she was. And she had no qualms with that.

"You're expected to meet him at two o'clock."

"Fine. If you'll excuse me," Claudia replied, pushing her chair back. She flashed a smile towards her mother, which they both knew was not sincere in the slightest, and walked out, closing the door behind her with an audible *click*.

It was a quick climb up the staircase that stood at the end of the foyer, then a sharp turn to the left and down the hall to her bedroom. In the past few months since she had begun her research internship assisting Professor Breckenworth, her bedroom had become more of a study that she just happened to sleep in. Books upon books had been stacked precariously on the writing desk, high enough that the bottom half of the window above it was completely covered, shedding the room in partial sunlight. A couple weeks prior, she had moved the wardrobe to the other side of the room to make space next to the desk for a collection of maps and diagrams.

Taking the professor's notice out of her pocket, she thumbed at the edge, annoyance itching under her skin; a perfectly good day of progress in her, well technically their, research wasted to entertain a bachelor in her mother's bid at playing matchmaker. Claudia exhaled in exasperation, rummaging through the wardrobe half-heartedly to find a suitable outfit, finally throwing on a cream colored dress, pulling on the matching fitted jacket before cinching it in at the waist with a small, brown leather belt. Then, seated in front of the vanity mirror, she brushed

her auburn curls up behind her head, letting her bangs fall gently across her brow as she secured a brown, wide-brimmed hat with a pearl ornamented pin.

“Claudia,” her mother called from below. “The car is already out front. Don’t keep Mr. Hawthorne waiting.”

At the announcement, Claudia let out a muted groan, digging for a small handbag in the back of the wardrobe, making just a tad more exaggerated noise as she marched back down the stairs to stand in front of her mother.

“You act as if we’re sending you to battle,” Katherine Finch sniffed. Claudia chose not to refute the statement, letting her silence speak for itself. With great reluctance, she ducked into the car, steeling herself for the encounter with Maxwell Hawthorne as the driver pulled away from the house, the tang of exhaust fumes wafting through the open window as he headed for the Penrose Lounge.

This brought Claudia back to her current situation.

Seated directly across from her was said gentleman. He was dressed in a three-piece suit, but had unbuttoned the jacket when he had taken his seat. Though it was obvious to Claudia that it had been custom tailored to his frame, she noted how the shirt was unpressed, the knot of his tie sloppily done, and *were those ink stains on the cuffs?* They were indeed ink stains. Fountain pen, she suspected. Her mother as well as the other women had made a point that morning of saying Maxwell was a bit dull, and far more interested in books than they felt a young man of his age should be. Claudia supposed they figured he would act like any other young man with money to spend and time to kill, cruising venues every night and having a drink and a laugh with pretty girls on either arm. Admittedly, she appreciated the fact that he was more of a bookworm,

like her, though realistically, she prepared herself to be hit by a wave of pretension and an air of condescension that seemed to seep from every male scholar she interacted with at university.

Blowing out a poorly-disguised exasperated breath, the force of it sending her bangs flying upwards, Claudia looked over at her prospective husband, and found a small amount of satisfaction that he looked every bit as uncomfortable as she.

“So,” Maxwell spoke, voice raised slightly to be heard over the chatter around them, “can I get you a drink?”

Claudia quipped, “It’s a bit early for alcohol, don’t you think, Mr. Hawthorne?”

“Believe me, if *your* mother set you up with different dates every other day, you’d be drinking at two o’clock too.”

“I didn’t know my company was so intolerable to you,” she replied, feeling slightly miffed. Yes, she was also nowhere near enthusiastic to be on a date with him, but it miffed her nonetheless.

“I never said that it was.”

“You were implying it.”

The corners of his lips twitched into a half-smile, “It’s not like you seem all that happy to be here with me either. I could sense your absolute reluctance and disinterest from the door.”

Claudia matched his expression and said, “Look, we both don’t want to be here. Why can’t we just say we had lunch and go our separate ways?”

“You think I haven’t tried that? She caught on after the first seven times I did, and now,” he pauses, jerking his chin subtly over to a suited man seated a couple tables away, “I have a sitter.”

Claudia huffed out a breath, “You’re serious? Your mother hired some guy to watch you go on dates so that you can’t bail?”

“Precisely, so for the next hours, let’s just both pretend to be two bored socialites forced to go on a date with each other and then we’re done,” Maxwell said, angling his body away from the suit’s vantage point to clasp his hands together in a praying motion.

“But we *are* two bored socialites forced to go on a date with each other.”

“Well, with those acting skills, you should try for the pictures,” he said with a wink.

“Anything but tea,” Claudia found herself saying after a moment.

“Pardon?”

Fiddling with the menu, she said, “If you want to get me a drink, all I ask is that it’s not tea.”

Maxwell raised a brow curiously, “Do you dislike it that much?”

“As much as you dislike going on dates,” she retorted.

The other chuckled, the sound light and good-natured. “Alright, how’s coffee then?” With a wry smile, Claudia gave him a nod, and a few minutes later, two cups of coffee were placed in front of them. In the sunlit room, the wisps of steam coming from the coffee added to the clouds of cigarette smoke around them, permeating the air. The combination of the two, scents warm and rich that entered the lungs and settled there, reminded Claudia of Professor Breckenworth’s office.

“So Mr. Hawthorne, do you have any hobbies?” Claudia asked, taking a sip once the coffee had sufficiently cooled.

He smiled, running a hand through his hair that left the brown strands in slight disarray. “Well, art history and curation kind of run in my family, so I guess I’ve always been interested in

the things of the past. Things lost and forgotten.” He paused to stir his coffee, staring down at the swirling contents before saying distantly, “At least until someone finds them.”

Claudi tilted her head, pinning him with an inquisitive look, “Is that what you plan to do? Find things, I mean.”

“It’s what my father did, and my two older brothers. So, I’m hoping it’s in the cards for me too,” he replied, expression determined.

“Or in your pockets,” Claudia quipped, then bit the inside of her cheek regrettably. “Sorry, it’s just that I would imagine funding for any sort of venture into archaeology would be fairly easy for someone like you.”

“Well yes,” Maxwell sighed, “it’s more a matter of convincing my father and his connected circle of investors and benefactors that what I want to find is worth the expense.”

“So, what is it that you want to find?”

Maxwell leaned forward, resting his forearm on the table, then gestured for Claudia to do the same.

“Have you heard of the statues of Erys?” he asked.

Claudia nodded, “Yes, I’ve heard of them.”

“I believe I have a viable lead on the location of the third.”

She stilled, then said, “You plan to find the last statue.” Maxwell gave a single affirmative nod. At that, Claudia leaned in closer, her face inches from his. “As am I,” she said, her gaze level and unblinking.

“Where do you think it is then?”

“I don’t think we’re acquainted well enough for that exchange of information, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Shall we see who finds it first, Miss Finch?” Maxwell extended his hand out towards her.

“Why not, Mr. Hawthorne,” Claudia said, shaking it. “Being two bored socialites forced to go on a date, we might as well make it interesting.”

Upon departing the luncheon, Maxwell had taken out a pen from his inside jacket pocket and scribbled down his personal telephone number on a spare napkin, handing it to her in full view of his sitter. And to her credit, Claudia tried her best to look somewhat flustered by the gesture. She ducked her head, the brim of her hat covering her face as she went to slip the napkin in her handbag. Yet before she could, a line of scrawl on the back caught her attention. It read:

—In case you change your mind about sharing research.

Standing up, she threw him a wry smile, “Unlikely. Though, if you’d like, I know a place that might be of particular interest to both of us.”

“May I ask where it is?”

“You’ll see. I’ll give you a call tomorrow,” Claudia said. “Good day, Mr. Hawthorne.”

Chapter 2

The Archives were nestled in the bureaucratic district of the city, and despite the towering offices on either side, the stone and marble building never seemed small. Upon entering through the double-breasted doors of mahogany, one was met with the high-vaulted ceilings of the foyer that led the main lobby, an open cylindrical space topped with a glass dome that let sunlight seep through and dance along the shelves.

There were four floors in total, two upper levels led by a large staircase that stood in the far corner of the main floor, while the lower level was located in the basement. The air was different, permeated with the slight tang of mildew and the thicker scent of stillness. On each floor, clerks sat dutifully behind their desks, paperwork and books up to their necks as they stamped and coded and filed their way the stacks. The rooms and halls were lined with floor to ceiling shelves, each crammed with volumes of encyclopedias, bound records of everything, from academic work to bureaucratic operations. It was the city's way of ensuring it would never die.

Once Claudia had exhausted the contents of her family's personal library, she had asked her father to let her go to the Archives. At the time, he had scoffed, remarking that it was improper of a young lady, especially of her pedigree, to go and peruse the shelves rather than having the materials delivered to their townhouse for her to read. Since he was paying for her university tuition, Claudia had initially listened to him, operative word being initially, resigned to filling out numerous request forms for various encyclopedic volumes, books, and records over the years. However, that predicament came to an end shortly after she met the professor.

Professor Breckenworth taught Archaeology and had been the head of the department for the last twenty years. He stood at a forty-five degree angle, shoulders perpetually hunched forward with wrinkled hands clasped behind his back. He had a mop of gray hair and a handlebar mustache which he was prone to stroking when deep in thought or when he was particularly hungry. And despite his age, he was smart as a whip, eyes sharp and alight with passion. Claudia, a freshman at the time, had knocked on his office door after class only to find it unlocked, and upon entering found the old man asleep in his desk chair with an opened book on his stomach, his thick horn-rimmed glasses sliding down the bridge of his nose. Both were flustered when the latter awoke, but when Claudia had apologized and went to leave, he waved her off, gesturing for her to sit back down.

“Ah, Miss Finch, it would seem you’ve caught me in a rather embarrassing moment. What can I do for you?” he had asked, pushing his glasses back up.

Claudia had replied, “I found your lecture on the ancient ruins of Iren today to be incredibly interesting. I was wondering why no one has done any work to decipher the inscriptions on the temple steles yet?”

“Well, for one, the Irena people used three different languages that we know of, and incorporated components from all three in their religious script. So, in order for us to even begin to translate those temple steles, we would need documents or inscriptions in each language, and try to piece together the meaning of each word.”

“Like the Rosetta Stone.”

“Precisely,” Professor Breckenworth nodded. “The problem does not lie in lack of interest, for decades now, archaeologists and historians have been trying to do more research on the Irena civilization, rather, the problem lies in the limitations of what we can discover due to

time. In fact, I have a former colleague of mine who now works at the Archives, and he did extensive work on this subject and on the Erysi civilization who mimicked the three-way cipher in their own language and religious rituals.”

“I’ve never been to the Archives before,” Claudia admitted.

Breckenworth’s eyebrows raised, “For such a bright and aspiring student of archaeology, it surprises me that you’ve never been.”

“My father didn’t think it was proper of me to go,” she explained, feeling strangely embarrassed. “I’ve gotten plenty of materials from the Archives, I’ve just never actually gone there.”

“Ah I see, I forgot that William Finch is your father,” he said, then murmured almost to himself, “Is it truly propriety he cares about, or that you just happen to be a woman?”

“Probably both,” Claudia answered, catching his eye.

Breckenworth gave her a conspirator’s smile, “As your professor, I’m assigning you a weekly research report that you must give to Mr. Eric Goldberg for him to review before turning it in to me. If your father continues to take issue with you visiting the Archives, then he may arrange a meeting with me. Is that clear?”

Claudia had grinned, “Yes, of course.”

“No sitter today?” Claudia asked once Maxwell had reached the top step to the Archives’ entrance. She peered around him to see a sleek car pulling away from the curb, exhaust fumes coughing as it drove off.

“No, thank God,” he replied, “I think yesterday’s date managed to convince my mother that I no longer need a chaperone.” He tilted his chin towards the doors, “So, the Archives?”

“Yes, I thought it might be a fruitful place for both of us. I asked Mr. Goldberg if he could retrieve some materials that pertain to our particular area of research.”

“You know Mr. Goldberg? The renowned historian and expert on the Irena civilization, Mr. Goldberg?” Maxwell asked incredulously.

“Yes, I do. Why is that so surprising to you?”

“No, I just mean that he’s so elusive. I’ve tried coming here many times to meet with him and ask him about his work, but he never seems to be around.”

“Did you study with Professor Breckenworth? Mr. Goldberg is an old colleague of his.”

Maxwell shook his head, “No, I didn’t attend university here.”

“Oh, where did you go?”

“I went abroad. Kind of a family tradition. But, I’ve always been fascinated with Goldberg’s work, especially his research on the Irena civilization. Have you seen his curated exhibit at the Museum?”

Claudia nodded, “Yes, we had mandatory field trips there every semester.”

It was a little strange how easily Claudia found herself being able to converse with the other, given her initial reservations about him. Though, the strangeness was less an unwelcome prickle underneath her skin than it was just the slight awkwardness that arises when two people transition from being strangers to being something less distant. She was hesitant to call them acquaintances, seeing that they had only really talked at length one other time, but as they continued to exchange facts and trivia about their favorite ancient civilizations, what artifacts they hyper-fixated on, Claudia was genuinely appreciative to have found a like-minded peer.

They entered the Archives, both taking a moment to breathe in the unique blend of settled air, old paper, and wood. Claudia called up the elevator in the lobby, shifting from one foot to the

other as she waited, the metallic sound of gears cranking and squeaking all the while. Once the outer metal barred gate and the inner elevator door had opened, the two stepped inside before Claudia reached to press the “B” button for the basement. They stood in relative silence, allowing the mechanical noises of the elevator’s descent to surround them. About halfway down, the car shuddered, the yellow overhead light flickering violently. Claudia glanced over to see Maxwell gripping the railing in a tight fist, head hanging low as his eyes squeezed shut.

“Are you alright?” she asked, reaching out a tentative hand to place it on his shoulder, eyes widening as she realized he was shaking ever so slightly.

“Y-yeah,” Maxwell replied, voice strained. “Just, uh, never took a liking to being inside elevators.”

“Do they make you claustrophobic?” She watched as he flexed his hand harder against the railing, the car giving another jerky shake as it continued to descend. He opened his eyes for a moment to look at her, a hint of reservation in his face before he gave her a tight nod. Claudia, who admittedly was almost not the most comfortable in cramped enclosed spaces, felt sympathetic and rubbed his shoulder in a semi-comforting motion.

“I’m sorry,” she apologized, “I didn’t know. Next time, we’ll take the stairs.”

The basement of the Archives was surprisingly well-lit; wall sconces had been installed every couple of yards and bathed the expansive floor in warm, yellow light. Mr. Goldberg’s office sat at the end of a small hallway that branched off from the main room. An enthusiastic “come in” answered Claudia’s knock, and she and Maxwell entered to see the bespectacled man rummaging through a thick volume bounded with leather cord.

“Miss Finch and,” Mr. Goldberg smiled, then adjusted his glasses as he cocked his chin at Maxwell, curiosity piquing his features as he extended his hand out, “I apologize, young man, I don’t think we’ve met before.”

“Maxwell Hawthorne, sir,” the other went to shake Goldberg’s hand, face awash with awe and excitement. “It’s an honor to meet you. I’m incredibly interested in your archaeological research.”

“As you know,” Goldberg said, turning to stacks of papers and books on top of his desk, “the Erysi civilization emerged as the Irena civilization ended. There is evidence that shows some geographic overlap between the two, and some Erysi ruins actually have traces of Irena script underneath the stone relief sculpture. Like the Irena, the Erysi people also worshiped a trinity of gods¹, and I understand that the two of you are interested in Erysi religious icons.”

“Specifically the statues of Erys,” Maxwell clarified. Something crossed the older man’s face that Claudia couldn’t quite decipher, but before her thoughts could linger on it, Goldberg cleared his throat and adjusted his glasses again.

“Yes, we have found two of them in the Temple of Eean, but the third has never been found.”

“Yet,” Claudia countered, raising her head to meet Goldberg’s eyes. At her response, the older man’s gaze hardened, his lips forming a tight line.

“So this is what the two of you are after? The third statue?”

“Yes,” Maxwell affirmed.

“May I ask why you are so insistent in finding it?”

“The Erysi found a way to access a power that could rival the forces of nature itself. They used the statues to call upon divine power and create portals to channel that power. They could

¹ The trinity: Erys, the sky, Esus, the sea, and Eean, the moon.

move mountains, part oceans, rearrange the topography and the location of islands,” Maxwell replied, his expression filled with almost feverish determination. “Do you know how valuable the knowledge of accessing that kind of power is?”

Goldberg scoffed, “You are basing this search on an Erysi myth from thousands of years ago. The statues do not have power, they are merely decorative, religious icons used for worship. The portals are not real, and plenty of scholars have driven themselves mad trying to chase a fairy tale. Do not make the same mistake for the sake of glory.”

Maxwell’s jaw tightened, “I’m not doing it for glory, I’m doing it for research. For the betterment of society and the world.”

“Why shouldn’t we find the last statue?” Claudia questioned, “Wouldn’t it at least be beneficial to us from an academic perspective to obtain all three? That way, we can begin to fully understand the Erysi religion and culture. Shouldn’t you as a scholar want this discovery to happen?”

Mr. Goldberg’s brow furrowed deeply, his voice pitching higher with irritation, “You are too young and naive to think that you can simply *find* the last statue of Erys. It is nothing like a treasure map from a child’s game where an “X” marks the spot. The locations of the statues aren’t on any map; we found the first two together in the Temple of Eean, and there is no evidence that shows a third statue was ever present. We assume there are three only because the two we have depict Esus and Eean, but there are no records that confirm the Erysi only had three of these statues, one for each god in the trinity, who’s to say there aren’t tens, or even hundreds more? And even if you found the third, before you can begin to use all three to decipher the religious rituals and beliefs of the Erysi, you would need to be fluent in Erysi, and to my knowledge, I am the only person capable of that on this side of the hemisphere.”

“I’m fluent,” Claudia said.

“It takes years to even begin to grasp the language, there is no way that you could be fluent,” Goldberg spluttered. While Claudia had visited him multiple times on her “assignments” from Breckenworth, and did have a great deal of respect for his work and intelligence, his blatant disbelief at her ability to learn a language, an ancient one albeit, irked her. She did not spend the last five years of her life studying scripts and jumbled translations, memorizing texts until she could recite them word for word for a senior academic to write her off.

Claudia marched over to Goldberg’s desk, pointing to the open book that showed a drawing of constellations. She traced the words written beneath it and said, “‘*Erys un eloch mas in Ere.*’ Erys lords over all above us.” Picking a different passage that had already been translated, she remarked, “I think it’s grossly misleading to translate ‘*Enysae il Ere*’ as merely ‘the Trinity’ when the phrase evokes such a deeper, more profound expression of kinship and spiritual bonds that connect Erys, Esus, and Eean together. If you directly translate each Erysi word, it reads, ‘Family’, the preposition ‘around’, and ‘Above’-”

“Fine, you may be proficient in this ancient language, but only fools blinded by their own egos believe in such fallacies like the power in those statues. The statue of Eean sits on display at the Museum, and has been for thirty years now. Have you ever felt anything powerful, any power coming from it? I have warned many colleagues, many aspiring students in this field against ventures as fruitless and baseless in reality as this. I had hoped the two of you were merely interested in my work and wished to discuss it with me. Now I see I can no longer in good faith allow you to access the archival material relating to these two civilizations,” Goldberg said, nostrils flaring.

“What! That’s not fair,” Maxwell protested.

“Please see yourselves out,” the older man said, voice hard.

“Mr. Goldberg please, we understand your concerns,” Claudia tried to placate him. “But Mr. Hawthorne and I truly believe we have a viable lead on the location of the third, and if you could just lend us your expertise in the geographic layout of the Erysi civilization, we can confirm our hypothesis and find the last statue.”

“I’m telling you, you will drive yourselves mad trying to find it. Accept that some things, no matter how badly we want them to be found, are lost to us forever. I will not aid your own demise,” Goldberg huffed, ushering them out of the door.

Blowing out a frustrated breath, Maxwell flicked his gaze over to her and snapped, “So much for your claim this place would be useful.”

Equally irritated, Claudia retorted, “It’s not my fault he chose to kick us out. I wouldn’t have taken us here, I wouldn’t have asked him about this if I didn’t think it was going to be useful to us.”

Maxwell let out a sigh, relenting, “I know, I apologize. I guess I didn’t think he, of all people, would be so opposed to this search. Because I really do think we have a shot at this, but we need to work together. We’re going to have to start trusting each other with our findings.”

Claudia wasn’t new to being collaborative, especially as an Archaeology major, but this was also something she had been working on, spent hours absorbing and annotating and collecting as much as she could in the hopes that maybe someone like Professor Breckenworth would see her value as a research intern and sponsor her own expeditions. She was aware that Maxwell’s family were one of the most affluent and thus influential people in the archaeology, art history, and museum studies worlds, and she could understand that working with him could

help them both, but part of her didn't want to share her findings with him. It felt like she was giving something up.

"I think it's on the island on the north end of the Erys archipelago," Maxwell said.

Claudia's shoulders slumped as she leaned back against the wall, "That island doesn't exist anymore. There was a shift in the plates towards the end of the Erysi civilization and the whole island essentially sunk into the ocean."

"John F. Herman, the explorer who found the other two statues noted on his expeditions and maps that the northern island is where the Temple of Erys was. I'm willing to bet the last statue is in there."

"But then why was the statue of Esus found together with Eean's and not inside her own temple? I'm sorry, Mr. Hawthorne, but I thought you said you had a viable lead on this."

"Fine, where do you think it is, then?"

"I think it's in the royal city ruins, specifically the catacombs beneath it. When the city fell at the end of the war, all the religious icons were either looted or destroyed, but there are accounts from after the sacking, and many say that the last statue was taken out of the temple and hidden in the catacombs."

Maxwell knocked the heel of his shoe against the wall, crossing his arms, "That's no better lead than mine. If you want to go digging through the catacombs beneath the ruin of an ancient city, be my guest, but I'm not going there."

"Because you'd much prefer diving for a temple sitting at the bottom of the ocean?"

Claudia raised a brow. "Besides, the whole point of coming here was that Goldberg was going to give us access to maps, records, and architectural layouts that could've helped either one of us."

“Maps? Statues with that much potential of power wouldn’t just be on a map,” he said, echoing Goldberg’s words.

“That’s still under the assumption that they even have that ability.”

“You don’t believe it?”

Claudia gestured vaguely in the air, “It’s hard to believe that an ancient civilization harnessed that kind of power. Portals? Moving mountains and parting seas? Sounds near biblical to be honest. It sounds more like hyperbole if anything, I’m sure they were a civilization that excelled in terms of its technology, religion, and culture, so no, I’m hesitant to believe that these three stone statues had such power.” Maxwell had nothing to say to that, but his expression remained tense, so Claudia decided it best to drop the issue. “Come on, let’s head up. There’s not much we can do here anymore.”

Chapter 3

It wasn't until a week after their unsuccessful visit to the Archives that Claudia discovered something truly and utterly impossible.

Her mother badgered her about Maxwell, poking and prodding for details about their two dates, if they could call the Archives a "date". Claudia gave her the most basic of information, that she thought they conversed well with one another and that they shared similar interests.

"Do you like him?" the older woman asked over the rim of her teacup. Claudia knew she meant if she was romantically inclined towards the other, but her head had been pounding since the night before, courtesy to a translation of an Erysi scroll that was so archaic in its composition and wordage that it took her several hours trying to piece together the most basic level of understanding of the script, and she found herself unwilling to cooperate.

"I like him in the same way that I like walking in the yard, or going to class."

Her mother pursed her lips, "I mean, do you think you could marry him?"

Right. This was the true reason why she had begun interacting with Maxwell in the first place.

"I've gone on two dates with him!" Claudia exclaimed. Her mother's nostrils flared at the sound of her raised voice.

"So?"

"So, I barely feel anything for him let alone whether or not I want to marry him."

Katherine Finch extended a manicured hand out in a little wave, like she was shooing a fly. "You just said you conversed with him well and the two of you shared interests."

“Yes, which can apply to peers, colleagues, friends. Being able to talk without loathing the person and being able to marry them are not mutually exclusive.”

“You’d be surprised,” her mother said, taking a delicate sip.

“Why do I have to?” Claudia knew she was being whiny; she logically understood that as the only daughter of a high profile family in the city, as a socialite, she was expected to marry and pump out a few kids to carry on the family line before handing them off to nannies and governesses so she could attend luncheons and ladies’ clubs. Claudia had no intention of becoming her mother.

“If this is how you behave when you don’t get your way, it’s no wonder Mr. Hawthorne hasn’t called for you again.”

That stung.

“I’m going out, I have a headache,” Claudia said pointedly, not waiting for her mother’s reply as she left the table, storming up the stairs to grab her coat and bag before marching out of the house.

It was one of the last warm days of autumn, though the light breeze carried a hint of colder weather. Claudia glared at the piles of leaves littering the sidewalk, kicking them out of her way as she walked, leaving a trail of vibrant colored foliage behind her. She hailed for a taxi, handing the driver a couple bills and directed him to head for the university. She went up to Breckenworth’s office to see if he was in, which he usually was, hoping to speak with him about the Erysi texts he had assigned her to translate in an effort to distract herself from her mother’s incessant questioning.

Early in the semester, the professor had announced that he would be taking on a new intern to assist him on his research: creating a more accurate chronology of the fall and end of

the Erysi civilization. Because she was fluent in Erysi, she had spent most of the semester translating Erysi texts and inscriptions that dated from just before the collapse of the civilization. However, no answer came when she knocked on his door.

“Professor?” she called out, then tried the doorknob and was surprised to find it unlocked. Maybe he had gone out for a walk? She entered his office, the smell of coffee and cigarette smoke blanketed her, but as she walked further inside, something on his desk caught her eye. Lying on the wooden surface was a photograph of a man she didn’t recognize. He wore a serious yet charismatic expression, and had an army uniform that marked him as a soldier. There was no name to go along with the photograph, but it was not framed and Breckenworth had never mentioned a son or a nephew who had fought in the war.

Then, she heard an unknown voice say something down the hall which was quickly followed by the professor’s classic wheezing laugh. They exchanged words for a minute or two longer, though too far out of earshot for Claudia to properly hear. She exited the office and waved to the older man who smiled back at her.

“Miss Finch, what brings you to me today?”

“Who were you talking to, professor?” Claudia asked, curiosity piqued.

Breckenworth shook his head, brushing her off, “Ah, just someone who is going to help me with my research. Now, what can I do for you?” With that, he gestured her back into his office where she explained how she had completed a translation for him and wanted to know what he thought.

An hour or so later, she had said goodbye to Breckenworth, walking a couple blocks to the Museum, still not yet ready to go back home. Since the weather was so nice, the Museum was rather sparsely crowded despite it being a popular time of the week to go. The sound of her

shoes against the marble foyer and wood floors echoed and reverberated with each step. Having visited the Ancient Civilizations wing numerous times, she had memorized the route, passing the elevator to go up the stairs to the second floor, turning right to the wing and then taking a sharp left to the Irena and Erysi hall. She saw no one. At last, in an open-door room at the end of the hall, she stopped in front of the Statue of Eean.

It stood about six and a half feet tall, carved from a single piece of stone and so highly polished that Claudia could see the way the light glinted off the greenish-black material. Eean, the moon god² donned a flowing set of robes that cascaded down her body like water before pooling at her bare feet. Her arms were positioned in front of her torso, right above the left, hands placed as if holding a sphere in the empty space between them. Her head, while absent of hair, was partially covered with a veil to represent clouds that obscure the moon in the sky. The base of the statue had been raised onto a simple pedestal inside a glass display case with a small, metal plaque giving a brief description of it along with information on when and where it was found.

As Claudia looked at the god behind glass, she felt a faint prickle begin to spread across the skin at the nape of her neck, akin to goosebumps, but less of a chill and more of an itch. She scratched at it, hoping to relieve the feeling, but the sensation only seemed to grow more prevalent. She felt a subtle kiss of balmy air against her cheeks and immediately looked to the windows only to find them all shut, not a single leaf swirling around outside. Something drew her attention back to the statue and Claudia had the unnerving feeling that the Statue of Eean was watching her. Maybe it was a trick of the mid-morning light in the room, but the usually neutral, stoic expression of stone seemed different now, its pupil-less eyes simultaneously unseeing and

² In most Erysi texts, Eean was usually perceived as female, like Esus, but the Erysi people did not use gendered language to denote their deities.

all-seeing. She felt herself sink into their black chasms, unable to look away as the statue seemed to almost pulse. Had she looked in her peripheral, she would've seen the glass case give a near imperceptible tremble.

Then, she was hit with an overwhelming sense of vertigo, her stomach lurched violently and a sharp jab of pain shot through her temples. She bent over to try to ease the pain and in doing so, the pendant around her neck swung forward, nearly hitting her in the face. Another bout of nauseating pain went through her, and when she managed to open her eyes again, she saw the stone set inside the pendant twitch by itself. Ripping it off, she held it up in front of her by the chain, cradling the pendant in the flat of her palm. Impossible. Flicking her gaze up, Claudia watched as the Statue of Eean pulsed once more, darting her eyes down to see the pendant twitch in its direction as if it was being summoned by something inside the case.

A god behind glass.

The pendant had been a gift from her father on her eighteenth birthday. Had he mentioned what kind of stone was inside? The throbbing in Claudia's head worsened the more she tried to remember where her father got the necklace. The only thing that was blatantly clear to her was that the stone inside the pendant held the same greenish-black hue as the statue in front of her. It couldn't be a mere coincidence, could it? That the stone seemed to somehow be responding to the statue, as impossible it was for two inanimate objects to move? Though Claudia had been to the Museum, had stood in front of this exact statue too many times to count in the last few years, and she had never experienced anything like this.

It was at this moment that Claudia recalled Mr. Goldberg's words from the week before.

“The statue of Eean sits on display at the Museum, and has been for thirty years now. Have you ever felt anything powerful, any power coming from it?” he had asked them. And then, as sound as his words appeared in her mind, Maxwell’s voice followed.

“They used the statues to call upon divine power and create portals to channel that power.”

It couldn’t be true, could it? Something like this, an ancient power, a force beyond human comprehension, sitting in the center of the city for a generation. So, why was the stone in her palm reacting like this?

The answer dawned on her a moment later. Like attracts like. Her mind raced, stomach turning as she tried to understand what she was seeing. Things instinctively want to return home, want to anchor itself in its origins. Maybe the location of the third statue wasn’t as impossible or improbable as she had once thought. She turned the pendant over in her hand, the surface strangely cold, like she was touching ice, and examined the greenish-black stone and in the span between two breaths, the name of it appeared. Diorite. Igneous rock formed by the cooling solidification of magma or lava. Lava. Volcanoes. She gasped. Stumbling out of the hall, Claudia rushed out of the Museum at record speed and located the nearest café and asked to use their telephone.

“Calling?” the operator asked.

“Mr. Maxwell Hawthorne, please. It’s urgent.” She chewed the inside of her cheek as the phone began to ring, pressing the receiver tightly against her ear. As she waited, her eyes wandered over to a man seated with a newspaper spread open across his lap, the front page heading staring back at Claudia: “Roaring Twenties No More -- Economic Crisis Takes Hold of the New Decade”.

“Maxwell Hawthorne, who’s speaking?” his voice came through seconds later.

“Mr. Hawthorne, it’s me, Claudia Finch. I’m at a cafe across from the Museum and I need you to come look at the Statue of Eean with me right now.”

“The Statue of Eean? Why do you need me to look at it? Did you find something?”

Claudia nodded, “Yes, I think I’ve figured out how we’re going to find the third statue.”

Needless to say, twenty minutes later, the little bell on top of the cafe door jingled and Claudia looked up to see Maxwell, slightly out of breath as if he had jogged. When she asked him if he did, he shook his head, warmth spreading across his cheeks and said that he was just incredibly out of shape. They crossed the street and entered the Museum, hurrying back up the stairs, going through the Ancient Civilizations wing until they stood, as Claudia did just half an hour before, in front of the Statue of Eean.

“So what did you find?” Maxwell asked. Claudia drew the pendant out from her coat pocket and held it out for him to see.

“Watch.”

She realized as she held the pendant out that if nothing happened, she’d look incredibly silly, and she didn’t think Maxwell would have a particular problem commenting on that. She inhaled through her nose, out through her mouth, stared at the statue and let it draw her in. After a minute or two, the faint prickle appeared once more at the base of her neck. She glanced over at Maxwell to see the other was rubbing at his own neck, loosening his tie as if he was feeling overheated. The same breath of balmy air wafted over them that had a saltiness in it that reminded Claudia of the sea. She found herself sinking in the greenish-black, diorite eyes of Eean once again, and at last, the statue pulsed and the pendant twitched and Maxwell let out a string of curses.

“What just happened?”

“I think the statue and the pendant are made from the same material: diorite. And somehow, the pendant seems to be responding or reacting to the statue. And the pricking feeling at the back of your neck, the salty warm air that appeared even though the windows are closed, did you feel the same things?”

Maxwell nodded, “Yes, but what is it? Is it,” he gestured to the statue inside the display case, “causing this?”

“I think it’s alive.”

“How? It’s made of stone. It’s a statue.”

“Remember what you said about the statues being used to call upon things, to summon things, that the Erysi channeled power through them?” Claudia said.

“You think the Statue of Eean is summoning your necklace, but why? Where did you even get that necklace?”

Claudia shrugged, “I’m not sure why the statue is doing what it’s doing, but it gives me the feeling that like attracts like, and things tend to want to return to where they came from, where they began. As for the necklace, it was a gift from my father, but I don’t remember where he got it from.”

“So that statue calls on the necklace because they’re both made from diorite. How does this connect with finding the third statue?”

“Diorite is an igneous rock which means it forms from cooling magma or lava,” Claudia explained in a rush. “And the only volcanic mountain range that would have this amount of pure diorite deposits to be used for statues like this are on the Erysi archipelago. If we could just get a

map or diagram we could start tracing where the statue was made and hopefully where it is now. The only problem is that without Goldberg, we don't have access to that information."

"I got it," Maxwell said, his eyes lighting up. "I'll buy the map."

"You can't just buy a map from the city Archives."

"Why not? My family founded the Hawthorne Historical Society. We have a ton of money, and my fiance deserves the perfect engagement present."

Claudia blinked once. Twice. "Excuse me?"

"Look," Maxwell said, "I'm not saying we'd actually be engaged-"

"That's exactly what it sounds like you're saying!"

"Where do you think we'd get funding for an expedition like this? Do you know any patrons or benefactors that would invest tens of thousands of dollars at the drop of a hat so that we can find the last statue?" he asked.

Claudia crossed her arms, "I'm sure if we submit a proposal to the Historical Society, we could-"

"It would take too long," Maxwell shook his head. "There is a faster, more guaranteed way of getting us funding for this expedition."

"And you think that way is for us to get engaged? We barely even know each other!"

"It wouldn't be for real," he explained, "we just need to play it up enough to convince my parents that we're seriously committed and then I'll ask to buy the map as a gift for you, and then arrange the funds for our first romantic getaway to the Peninsula³."

"But why the Peninsula? Why not ask to go straight to the Archipelago?"

³ The Peninsula: located along the southern coastal border, it is a popular vacation spot renowned for its beautiful scenery and wildlife, in particular, their constellation street markets. Being so close to the equator, the constellations are almost always visible in the sky, so the street markets congregate at night and use the light of the constellations as a guide through them.

“I did some digging on Goldberg, and he’s pretty well connected to the people who typically fund the archaeological expeditions proposed in the city. I’m sure he’s keeping an eye on us, so I can’t just ask my parents to send us straight there, they’ll get suspicious. And to answer your question, why the Peninsula? I figured we should do what most newly engaged couples do on vacation, sight-seeing and exploration,” Maxwell said, putting added emphasis on the last word.

Claudia blew out a breath and rubbed at her temples. “So, your plan is that we pretend to be engaged so that we can get funding for a trip to the Peninsula under the pretense that it’s for a romantic vacation? But then, how are we going to get to the Erysi Archipelago?”

“We can charter a ship from the Port.”

“We’re going to get caught,” Claudia frowned, chewing on her bottom lip.

“Not if we’re careful,” Maxwell retorted. “Though, we’re not convincing anyone like this.”

“Like what?”

“I understand that we haven’t really known each other for very long—”

“All of two weeks,” Claudia snorted with a raised brow.

“But,” Maxwell pinned her with a look. “If we want this to actually work, we’re going to have to act like we actually like each other, not just tolerate each other’s presence. We should be on a first name basis, or maybe a pet name would be better...”

Claudia wrinkled her nose up, “No pet names. I’d rather eat glass.”

Maxwell huffed out a laugh, “You don’t want me calling you *darling*?”

“Claudia is fine,” she said. “Should I call you Maxwell, then?”

His eyes widened as he shook his head, “Only my parents call me that, especially when they’re upset with me. Just call me Max.”

“Alright, Max,” she said, trying the shortened name out in her mouth, “Let’s go pick out a ring.”

Chapter 4

To be perfectly honest, Claudia was expecting raised brows and at least some degree of skepticism when she and Max announced their engagement. However, both of their families expressed their enthusiasm for the union. And, as Max had predicted, once Claudia had shown off her diamond-encrusted ring, it took very little convincing to get his parents to purchase the map from the Archives and even less to get them to buy plane tickets to the Peninsula.

The press had swarmed them at the airport, hungry for details about the engagement of the children of two most influential families in the city. Dozens of reporters and photographers for various newspapers and magazines had followed them all the way to the airstrip, their voices overlapping in a cacophony of questions that demanded answers and claims thrown out like bait, all waiting eagerly for a bite. One particularly persistent reporter had all but thrown himself in front of them, taking a moment to wipe a crumpled handkerchief across his forehead, catching the beads of sweat that had appeared since he had run up to them.

“Mr. Hawthorne,” he had asked in a reedy voice, “is it true that the two of you are headed for the Peninsula?”

“Yes, I wanted to treat my fiance to a special getaway trip before she gets too busy with all the wedding planners,” Max replied smoothly, placing an arm around her shoulder and drawing her close. Claudia, while still not used to the physical intimacy their fake arrangement demanded, tried her best to react naturally and warmly to his touch. Thankfully, half of her face was obscured by a wide-brimmed hat, pinned at an angle that allowed for her to not be utterly exposed by the constant flashing of cameras. She settled for a composed smile, reaching out to

loop her own arm around Max, and made sure to place her left hand deliberately on his chest, the diamonds encircling her fourth finger winking at the crowd.

“So your trip to the Peninsula has nothing to do with the fact that the famous Erysi Archipelago is only a day or two’s journey south?” the reporter continued, pen gesturing towards them in a somewhat accusatory manner.

Max stiffened slightly beside her, though his voice was playful as he spoke, “That’s quite a conclusion, sir, though completely ungrounded, I’m afraid.”

“I don’t think it’s *completely* ungrounded, Mr. Hawthorne. According to my source, you recently made a very interesting purchase.”

“Who’s your source?”

“I’m afraid I’m not at liberty to say. So, it’s true then, that you’ve purchased a map of the Erysi Archipelago from the Archives?”

The gang of reporters and photographers still trying to heckle them now quieted down, their attention honed in on the conversation, like vultures spotting a carcass in the desert. When Max didn’t immediately answer, the crowd erupted in noise, demanding an explanation. Claudia’s skin prickled with discomfort and unease, not used to the barrage of attention that seemed to strip her naked, leaving her feeling raw and exposed despite being completely clothed.

Sensing the mounting tension, she forced out a laugh that she hoped carried an air of amusement. “Oh, Max just thought it would be a nice gift for me. We’re both archaeology students, you see. It’s how we met,” she said, gazing up at Max and giving him an affectionate smile. He nodded, returning the smile. The click of twenty something shutters went off around them, and Claudia just knew they’d be on the front page of the papers. For most, it was a satisfying enough answer, a cute trinket for two scholars, a memento shared between them as a

reminder of how they met and fell in love. Though, the reporter standing in front of them did not look as convinced as the rest. But before he could continue to probe, attendants were ushering Claudia and Max away from the press and towards the portable staircase that led up to the airplane's door.

Once in their seats, Claudia leaned in toward Max and muttered, "Goldberg is onto us. Clearly."

He gave her terse nod and murmured back, "It's fine, we have two weeks before the ship leaves for the Archipelago. Let's just play the happy couple and hopefully we'll get him off our tail."

Hidden by her hat, Claudia rolled her eyes and huffed out a breath. They had had a conversation about how they were going to manage the physical intimacy aspect of their arrangement, and while both were conscious of the kinds of gestures and contact that would make their engagement believable, neither were incredibly enthusiastic about performing said gestures. Claudia had forbidden kissing right off the bat, Max immediately was in agreement, though the two decided that holding hands would be acceptable. Still, she wasn't used to having someone, regardless of gender, this close to her at all times. She wasn't used to the expectation of intimacy, and was still fighting the urge to put a more comfortable distance between the two of them, to brush off his arm around her shoulder or her waist. It wasn't that she found Max repulsive or that he made her uncomfortable, she just had never been particularly comfortable with physical contact with anyone in any capacity.

Worse, was putting on the facade of affection and romantic attraction towards him; again, Claudia could understand that Max was an objectively handsome young man, but she did not feel any inkling of those feelings, and to her knowledge, neither did he. They were partners in a

sense, and the arrangement was one out of convenience and to the benefit of both of them, but again, they hardly knew each other, and Claudia found that trying to fake that level of emotional connection was proving harder than expected, especially in front of the press. As the plane's engines roared to life, Claudia let out a sigh, looking to the next two weeks at the Peninsula with much reluctance. Perhaps, in that time, she'd become a better actress, for both of their sakes.

To the knowledge of their families, the press, and the social elite, Claudia and Max were to be happily vacationing in the Peninsula and not due to return until the end of the month. In actuality, they were to depart secretly for the Archipelago after a week had passed and the coast was clear. Located on the southern border, the weather showed no trace of the incoming winter months. Persistent sunlight blanketed the city for most of the day, and the white, clay-baked houses reflected its rays so strongly that Claudia was near blind without her sunglasses. They took tours of the historical sites of the city, and while they were really only there under the pretense of throwing off any suspicion about their expedition, Claudia couldn't help but take notes of the architecture, the wildlife, and scenery the two of them came across.

Max was no different; whenever Claudia paused to look up from her sketching or jotting down the names and dates she found on inscriptions, she'd find the other a few feet away from her, fountain pen scribbling furiously across his notebook as his eyes darted from page to plaque in an almost feverish manner. Like he couldn't get enough. Like he wanted to know everything there was to know. Something inside Claudia hummed in a mixture of affirmation and comfort at the way her own intellectual ambitions were echoed by him.

Their first week in the Peninsula went by faster than Claudia thought, and all of the sudden it was Saturday evening. The two had gotten a nice dinner at one of the more popular upscale venues that had an unobscured view of the sea. She had never been a picky eater per se,

though it did take some convincing from Max for her to try the broiled Pennium fish⁴. The filet tasted good and was well-seasoned, but she had to take a few sips of the sweet wine to wash down the strong aftertaste of brine. Max had snickered at her uncomfortable expression as she swished the wine around in her mouth to alleviate the saltiness from her palate. She glared at him in response, leaning over the table to swat his arm. Afterwards, they walked along the beach back towards their hotel, shoes sinking into the soft sand with every step. It was only in the privacy of the hotel room they shared that the two began to formulate their plan.

“The chartered boat leaves tomorrow morning, so we should get to the Archipelago by Monday or Tuesday at the latest,” Max said, looking at a particular page in his notebook.

“Great! We can explore the royal city first then since it’s on the main island,” Claudia suggested.

“Actually, I asked the captain to dock at the Temple of Eean.”

“Why?”

“Just as a precaution,” he explained. “If we make camp at the temple, we can use our archaeology student backgrounds as a cover for why we’re there. Plus, the Temple of Eean is relatively close to the royal city and only half a day’s journey to the northern island, so we’ll still be able to check out both of our leads before we have to come back here.”

Claudia chewed on the inside of her cheek, “Do you think someone is following us? Goldberg?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so. Besides, I chartered this boat specifically for the crew’s subtlety. If everything goes as planned, no one will even realize that we’re gone. At least, no one that we wouldn’t want to realize.”

⁴ Pennium fish, *Betta penniumus*. Approximately seven inches in length, characterized by its two-toned green and copper scales and signature cross-hatched stripes. Primarily eats salt crabs which gives it a sweet but slightly briny flavor; it is considered a local delicacy in the Peninsula.

Claudia watched as Max laid out two maps on top of the large wooden desk sitting beside the balcony, smoothing out the surfaces with a delicate, almost reverent hand. The smell of old parchment and faded ink instantly met and mixed with the salty tang of the sea that hung in the air.

“So,” Max said, glancing over at her, “we have about ten days before we have to be back on the Peninsula. The volcanic mountains span this cluster of islands to the east, and the temples of the Trinity are here, here, and here,” he pointed to three other islands on the other map to the north, south, and west. Each was about the size of Claudia’s pinky nail, and the Erysi word that marked them simply read ‘*Harin*,’ roughly translated to ‘house.’

Houses of the gods.

“Okay, like you said, we can start at the Temple of Eean, then explore the diorite deposits on the eastern islands to see if we can figure out where they made the statues. Should we flip for which lead we go to first, or do you want to split up then meet back at the Temple after a couple days?” Claudia asked.

“That depends, are you ready to work together on this? Or is it still going to be a race to see who finds it first?” he teased. She rolled her eyes at him. “Alright, let’s explore the royal city first, then we’ll go to the site of the sunken island.”

“How are you going to get the statue? Are you going to fish for it?”

Max grinned, “You’ll see.”

The *Indiscretion* was waiting for them, a medium-sized trawler nestled amongst the larger, more ornate ships and schooners docked at the harbor. The boat was clearly built for rough seas and rougher weather, its body stocky and compact. While it didn’t seem in disrepair, Claudia noted how rust littered the sides, the oxidized color overlaying the chipped paint so that

the hull became one muddy orange hue. Massive nets lay in heaps on the deck while large fishing hooks attached to rope sat in semi-disturbed coils, the metal dotted with barnacles.

The crew milled around, some on deck while others stood on the dock inspecting the rigging. One member helped Claudia and Max bring their things aboard; each brought a small suitcase for their clothing and personal belongings. Max also had a day pack that looked like it hadn't seen a day in the field since it left the store. For Claudia, she brought along her durable canvas and leather satchel that she had been using since she began university. It carried an array of extra pens and ink, scraps of paper that she had taken out of her field journal as well as a few books on Erysi religion and a small book on common translations. The captain tipped his cap to them as they boarded, hands resting against the helm. Yet, someone other than the captain or the crew was already on board and turned to face the two with a conspirator's smile.

"Professor Breckenworth?! What are you doing here?" Claudia exclaimed, equal parts relieved and confused to see a familiar face. It did not register to her, at least not immediately, how Breckenworth had ended up on the same chartered boat as them, which just so happened to be headed for the Erysi Archipelago.

The old man adjusted his glasses and said, "Ah, Miss Finch, what a small world we find ourselves in, wouldn't you agree?"

"Yes, but," she furrowed her brows, "what brings you all the way to the Peninsula? To this boat? Shouldn't you be back in the city teaching?"

"I'm a man with not much time left," he said with a strange amount of cheer that proved most unnerving to Claudia who was used to the quiet, pensive ruminating cadence of the professor's voice. "I thought I'd go on one last adventure before I get too senile to remember what it's like to yearn."

Max cleared his throat beside Claudia, setting his day pack down on a partially dry patch of the deck, “And you chose to come here? To the Peninsula?”

“I’m not here for the Peninsula,” the professor said, then gestured towards the luggage the two had brought, “and it would seem, neither are you.”

“Professor,” Claudia said carefully, “we just didn’t want to cause a scene with our departure. Max and I are only going to see the Temple of Eean for ourselves. Sort of an archaeology student’s dream come true.”

She didn’t like lying to him; he had been something like an uncle or grandfather to her, a mentor that had guided her in her academic passions and cultivated her into the ambitious student she was. His approval was something she sought after, cherishing it like the last breath of warmth summer before the first turn of autumn; she strived for Breckenworth’s praise and validation more than her two parents combined. She figured it was because he cared about her more than her two parents combined. However, Breckenworth and Goldberg were old friends and colleagues, and it wasn’t that far of a leap for both Claudia and Max to be wary of the professor’s sudden appearance on the same, supposedly discreet voyage.

Breckenworth gave a wheezing laugh and stroked his mustache, “Miss Finch, think of me as your commade in this escapade, a fellow traveler to the ruins of the ancient past. Nothing more.”

All of the sudden, the hard *thump* of boots rattled up the gangplank and a second, unexpected addition was made to the trawler’s makeshift passenger manifest. The unknown man stepped onto the deck, cigarette hanging from the corner of his lips which were crooked up in a smirk. He was tall and had the rugged, muscular build of someone well-acquainted with danger, but as he walked toward them, Claudia noticed the slightest limp in one of his legs. Strapped to

his belt was a pair of holsters on either side of his hips, each carrying a pistol, the sleek metal of the barrels half hidden in the shadows of his open leather jacket. As she looked at his face, she inhaled sharply, recognition blossoming. He was the person in the photograph she had seen on Breckenworth's desk.

"Lively bunch, are we?" he remarked, voice surprisingly smooth and deep in contrast with his rougher appearance.

"M-may I just ask who you are?" Max said.

The man flicked the butt of his cigarette away and gave a half-salute, "Sean Barrett, at your service."

"Barrett, this is chartered boat-

Barrett placed another stick in his mouth and jerked his chin towards the captain, "Nothing a couple of benny's can't fix. Made me near broke though, son of bitch. Luckily we're headed somewhere that'll change that."

"And where might that be?" Max asked, his grip on the straps of the day pack tightening.

"Why am I not surprised that a suit like you is having a go at playing adventurer?" Barrett smirked, cocking a discerning brow at him. "I bet those hands have never touched dirt. How'd you reckon you're going to go digging for treasure?"

"Who said anything about treasure?"

The man grinned, teeth sharp, "I did. That statue is going to make me a very rich man."

As the crew lifted anchor and set a course for the Archipelago, Claudia met Max's eyes and knew things had just become infinitely more complicated now.

Chapter 5

The first thing that Claudia noticed when she came up on deck the next morning was how perfectly blue the water was. It was nothing like the dark depths from the ports back home, the blue losing to black until you were afraid to dip your hand under the surface lest it never came back up again. Neither was it like the teal colored sea that hugged the coastline of the Peninsula that seemed to sparkle off the white backdrop of the sand. No, the waves the *Indiscretion* was cutting through held such a pure azure hue that it looked almost painted, too saturated of a color to exist in reality, yet here it was, right in front of her.

The second was the abundance of vegetation spread out in every direction. If there had been some kind of pier in antiquity, it had long succumbed to the elements and might of the ocean; so, they had no choice but to weigh anchor a half-mile or so off-shore and take motorboats to get them onto land. Luscious shades of green spanned her entire line of vision as trees with full branches of leaves canopied entire sections of the terrain. If she looked up, more outcrops of fauna hung from the rocky cliffs, their color bursting with vitality against the dark stone hewn from the constant battering of the tides. And further in the distance, she could just make out the peaks of the volcanic mountain range on the eastern islands, protruding like vertebrae down a spine of some great creature.

“My God,” Breckenworth said in awe, “this is paradise.”

They cut the engines a couple hundred feet away from the beach, the water too shallow for the motorboats to progress any further. As their party began to exit the boat, Claudia did her best to bunch up her long walking skirt. Max offered her a hand as she stepped out into water that came up to just below her knees, and despite her efforts, it immediately soaked the entire

bottom hem. Sean Barrett swung his legs over the side of the motorboat in one motion before hopping down beside them with a loud *splash*, the previous action causing the watercraft to lurch and rock. Last to exit was Brekenworth, and having rolled his slacks up to his knobby knees, began wading towards the beach. The second motorboat was made up of crew members from the *Indiscretion* who had been assigned to help them on their expedition.

Schools of brightly colored fish darted around them as they made their way ashore, and every now and then, Claudia would feel a momentary brush of fins or scales tickle the back of her bare calves. The air, heavy with heat and humidity, held the same balmy quality that she felt in the Museum when she stood before the Statue of Eean, and she resisted the urge to take out the pendant that sat warm beneath the hollow of her throat.

For the most part, the beach laid bare, the white expanses of sand occasionally interrupted by clumps of dried seaweed or the remains of a half-buried fishing net. Unlike the gray gulls that frequented the piers in the northern part of the continent, an assortment of vibrantly feathered and ornately plumed birds soared overhead. A cluster of them sat perched on the branches of a small grove where the beach melded into forest.

“Look,” Claudia said, tapping Max’s arm to alert him. “Erysi birds of paradise.” They stilled where they were, the waves lapping against their legs as they watched the group click their beaks, vocalizing amongst each other. Before the two could observe and admire them any longer, Barrett was trudging onto the beach and marching for the forest to hack away at the overgrowth in order to reveal the once well-traveled path leading deeper into the island, the sound startling the birds into flight.

There was a quiet stillness that enveloped them as if the island itself remained in an ancient slumber. Although the lush greens and bursts of florals amid the vegetation flooded their

senses, all of it felt stunted in its vitality, and Claudia felt a small tinge of unease at disturbing that stillness, that quiet. She began to feel that itch under her skin as if something was drawing her closer, drawing her downwards into some unknown chasm beyond her own field of perception.

After an hour of trekking across uneven ground, their party finally came upon the Temple of Eean. A web of vines spread across the stone steps that led up to the temple entrance which had been carved out of the natural hillside and made of pure diorite. Walking into the Temple of Eean had Claudia's stomach clenching in equal measures of excitement and fear. She was conscious of the fact that she was about to step into a structure built thousands of years ago; she would be touching the remnants of ancient hands at work. While the Archipelago had been left completely unpopulated following the fall and total collapse of the Erysi civilization, the last expedition to the islands had been thirty years ago, and it was during that expedition that the two statues had been found⁵. The only evidence of it was a small grouping of initials etched onto the side of an overturned stone pedestal lying towards the far right of the entrance. The temple was blissfully cool inside, a much welcomed relief from not only the relentless heat and humidity, but also the swarms of winged insects that hounded them. Claudia had already been bitten a few times and could feel the small welts growing, a fierce itch accompanying each one.

Sunlight only reached as far as the mouth of the temple, but along the walls moving deeper inside were stone pillars with carved, bowl-like divots. Max squatted down at the base of one of them, swiped a few fingers across the ground and brought them back up covered in soot, then stood and reached his hand into one of the divots, palm left near black with ash.

⁵ The expedition was led by John F. Herman, a renowned cartographer and explorer, who with a small team of archaeologists, spent four months traveling the main islands of the Archipelago. Their most notable discovery was that of the Statue of Esus and the Statue of Eean found within the ruins of the Temple of Eean. Additionally, the team orchestrated excavation projects in the royal city, mapping out a crude network of the catacombs that lay beneath it. Herman died from a mysterious illness only a month after returning from the journey.

“This was how they provided light in here,” he said, pointing to the divots. “Herman stated that the Erysi most likely filled them with some kind of long-lasting fuel and lit them like primitive torch-lamps.”

“Hand me one of those, will you?” Barret barked at one of the crew members who unlatched a kerosene lantern from the packs and gave it to him. He came over to where Max was standing, mouthed a, ““Scuse me, pretty boy” around his unlit cigarette before unscrewing the port cap and poured some of the liquid into the divot, the acrid smell dispersing into the dank, undisturbed air. Striking a match, the divot held a burst of flame, contained within the stone sides but offering a decent amount of light.

Following his lead, a couple of crew members began to pour kerosene into the empty stone divots, quickly illuminating a pillared path towards the center of the temple nestled deep within the hillside. Smaller lamps were then handed out to each of them to individually hold. Claudia unbuckled her satchel, retrieving a copy of the architectural drawings Herman had made of the temple layout: past the entrance, the pillars opened up to a larger hollowed out space, a cylindrical altar standing in the very center. Along the walls were more pillars with torch-lamp divots, and in the spaces between each pillar were intricately carved, stone relief, depicting the divine birth of Eean from her mother, Esus and father, Erys. And finally, where the reliefs of Esus and Erys came together was a pure diorite pedestal where the Statue of Eean once stood.

Once they came to the altar room, Claudia found herself in awe once more. She had seen the glass plate photographs the Herman expedition took of the interior and of the relief panels on the walls, but standing in front of them, being able to go up and brush her fingers along the stone-carved figures felt dizzying and near surreal. As she stood, she noticed something the photographs had not been able to clearly capture: unbroken lines of text, inscriptions, all in the

Erysi, lay across the panels, running right through the carved scenes and figures. She immediately took out her journal and pen and began transcribing the text, her fervor gaining Max's attention who had been examining the diorite pedestal. She took a few steps, tracing over the words as they continued to the next panel.

“What is it, Claudia?” Max said, looking up at her.

“They're inscriptions,” she replied breathlessly, “They seem to be repeating the same lines over and over again, all around this room.”

“Can you translate what it says?”

“Yes, give me a moment,” Claudia nodded, scribbling down the last couple of words onto the page, then scanned over the three lines from the beginning. “It says: ‘The divine daughter of Erys and Esus, Eean, god of the moon, harbinger of night resides here. May she watch over us dutifully, like the moon watches over the sky and sea. May she bless us forevermore.’”

“It sounds like a prayer or incantation,” Max commented once she had finished translating.

Breckenworth, who had been looking at the panel opposite them, strolled over and said, “Ah, yes, the Erysi, like the Irena civilization, were known to have a complex set of religious rituals and ceremonies to honor the trinity. Many were in the form of incantation or recitations of prayers that they thought could summon the gods to them.”

“By using the statues,” Max said. “The statues are like a conduit, a link between them and their gods.”

“You believe the statues harness power then?” Breckenworth raised a brow.

“Yes, I do. Actually, we spoke to your old colleague Mr. Goldberg about it. And he wasn't too fond of the idea. He said we were mad to believe it.”

Breckenworth hummed, “We archaeologists are all a bit mad, wouldn’t you agree?”

Looking away from the professor, Max gestured to Claudia’s journal and spoke, “Well, if these inscriptions are supposed to be recited as a prayer to Eean, it would’ve been spoken in Erysi. Can you try to say it like that?”

“Max, the Statue of Eean isn’t here anymore,” she said, “I don’t think reciting these lines will do anything.”

“We won’t know if we don’t try,” Max urged. “Herman wasn’t fluent and no one on any of the expeditions was either. This would be the first time this language is uttered, especially words that would’ve been used in religious ritual in over a thousand years. Please, can you just try?”

“Okay,” she conceded, “I’ll try.” She smoothed her hand over the page, clearing her throat before beginning to speak, her mouth forming around ancient syllables as they spilled from her lips, the cadence and rhythm even as the utterance of the words echoed off the walls. The three of them paused once she had finished the recitation, trying to see if it prompted any change.

Nothing seemed to stir.

“Maybe this altar needs to be lit,” Max said, bringing his kerosene lantern towards the cylindrical, stone pit at the center of the room. It too was filled with old ashes and dust, and ignited rather quickly, the flames erupting into tendrils of brilliant orange. Claudia took another breath, wrinkling her nose at the scent of burning kerosene, and began to recite the inscriptions again. Half-way through her recitation, the sudden sound of liquid spraying distracted her and she turned to see what it was. To her absolute horror, Sean Barrett stood facing one of the walls and was pissing, the stream splattering against the carved reliefs.

“What are you doing?!” she exclaimed, voice shooting up an octave.

Barrett flinched at the sudden outburst, turning his head over his shoulder to pin her with an annoyed expression, “What does it look like I’m doing? I had to take a leak.”

Max glared at him, “Mr. Barrett, you do realize that we’re in an ancient temple, right? This is an extremely valuable archaeological site. You can’t just be pissing on the walls, do you know how damaging urine can be on stone carvings?”

Barrett buttoned his trousers back up and waved them off, “Don’t get your panties in a bunch. I’m sure all kinds of animals have pissed and shat all over these walls for the last thousand years, and nothing’s happened.”

“Barrett, you’re not going to get rich if the artifacts you bring back reek of human urine,” Claudia bristled.

The man shrugged, “My clients don’t concern themselves with trivial things like that. Unlike people in your circles, I can imagine, I don’t give a damn where the thing ends up after I hand it over just so that I get my cut.”

“Your clients? Who are you? Some kind of treasure hunter?”

“You could say that,” Barrett grinned, “but then, what would you call yourself?”

Claudia crossed her arms, “An archaeologist.”

“Same thing.”

“We are *not* the same thing,” she retorted, then gestured to herself, and then to Max and Professor Breckenworth. “You’re taking ancient treasures for profit. We’re doing it for the pursuit of academia.”

Barrett cocked his chin, unconvinced. “You say tomato, I say tah-mah-toe.”

“Unbelievable,” she scoffed, her cheeks hot with indignation.

Before the tension between them could mount any higher, they were interrupted with the arrival of the rest of the crew who carried amongst them camping equipment, food rations and supplies, and two large wooden crates. It took two people to carry each one, the weight of its contents made known by the protruding veins in their arms as they strained to keep them level. The first's descent to the ground was rather smooth, landing onto the stone floor with a soft *thud*, but when the other two members went to lower the second crate, one of them faltered while readjusting their grip, and in that momentary loss of control, the crate tilted and dropped towards the unforgiving ancient stone beneath their feet. Claudia, who was determinedly distancing herself from Barrett lest she let her temper get the best of her, wouldn't have given the crates much thought had Professor Breckenworth not let out a sharp gasp followed instantly by him running, as fast as he was able, towards the wooden containers, face twisted with consternation.

"Be careful with those!" he barked in a voice uncharacteristically shrill. By then, the pair of crew members had restabilized the second crate and managed to place it down with only a slightly louder *thud* than the first.

"Sorry," one of the men apologized, "they're a lot heavier than we thought."

The professor brought his hand up to his heart, chest rising and falling between hunched shoulders as he stood spluttering. For words or for breath, Claudia couldn't quite tell. She watched as the old man whipped his index finger out, shaking it in accusation as he began to scold the men, little flecks of spit catching in the hairs of his mustache as he spoke.

"What's in these anyway?" the other man asked, "Bricks?" Breckenworth swiped the flat of his palm out in a gesture so professorial that it was met with immediate obedience. He fixed the pair with a piercing look, eyes narrowed behind his horn-rimmed glasses.

“The contents of the crates are not only extremely delicate, but are also instrumental to my-our research here, that is all you need to know. So, *please*, exercise utmost caution with them,” he said.

His research?

Claudia frowned, she was his newest intern this semester, she knew what he was researching: historical evidence of the last dynastic line before the collapse of the entire civilization. That was why she had been mainly assisting him with translating Erysi texts and inscriptions on various architectural monuments to help frame the chronology leading up to the end of the Erysi. This only served to confuse her more as Breckenworth would have definitely mentioned going to the Archipelago had it been for his research, and while Claudia wouldn't have expected him to ask her to come along as a translator, she found it odd that he hadn't notified her at all. So, why hadn't he? She thought back to when she had first seen him on board the *Indiscretion*, trying to recall his reason for coming here, the crease between her brows deepening like a chasm.

“I thought I'd go on one last adventure before I get too senile to remember what it's like to yearn,” he had said. *“Think of me as your commade in this escapade, a fellow traveler to the ruins of the ancient past. Nothing more.”*

He said he was here for an adventure, not research. And besides, how would exploring the Temple of Eean help him with his research? The foundations dated to at least the third dynasty⁶, a couple hundred years before the end of the Erysi civilization as a whole. If

⁶ The 3rd Dynasty was established by King Elum following a period of civil war between him and his military rival, Rasea. His reign brought in an era of peace and stability that is largely recognized as Erysi's Golden Dynasty. King Elum was responsible for the construction of the three temples of the Trinity: Erys on the northern island, Esus on the southern, and Eean on the eastern.

Breckenworth really wanted to find evidence that pertained to his research he would've gone to the ruins of the royal city.

Wait. Claudia's eyes widened as her brain caught up with the thoughts sprinting through her brain. Maybe that was where he was heading for, not the Temple of Eean, but the royal city. Maybe this wasn't about Goldberg and the last statue but rather the catacombs under the city and how there might be tombs or remains that could lend as evidence for Breckenworth's chronology project. She was still confused why he wouldn't have just told her that to begin with, but before she could linger on the thought, Max called her name from where he was standing among a heap of metal poles and canvas.

"What was that about?" he asked once she came over, the two working together to pitch the tent. He jerked his chin in Breckenworth's direction who had been given a chair to sit down in right next to the two crates.

"I'm not sure," she admitted, "and I don't know if that's a good thing."

Chapter 6

Morning came without incident, and they were quick to assemble daypacks and food rations before exiting the temple and making their way towards the beach and onto the motorboats to carry them back to the anchored *Indiscretion*. Rather than spending at least two days trekking south from the Temple of Eean past the ruins of the royal city and up to the northeast to reach the diorite deposits on the volcanic mountains, they opted to board the trawler again, crossing the bay and heading directly east. As not to get into the crew's way, Claudia went underneath the deck, motioning Max to follow.

"So, let's go over the logistics one more time," she said, taking a seat on the hard cushioned bench that jutted out from the cabin wall. Max sat down beside her and prompted her to continue. She tugged the silver chain around her neck over her head, removing the pendant from the confines of her blouse before gingerly placing it in the palm of her hand for both of them to see. "Given the reaction we saw back at the Museum, we can assume that there is some kind of attraction between the statues and this pendant. My guess is that it's partially because they are made from the same material, diorite."

"Partially?" Max asked.

"Well," Claudia chewed on the inside of her cheek. "If the statues really do possess supernatural powers, divine powers, then it means that there must be some kind of ritual or process that gives it to them."

"What do you mean?"

"Diorite itself doesn't have properties that would support any kind of 'superpower', regardless if it was a mistranslation of an exaggeration believed to be true. It's the result of

magma cooling and the Erysi Archipelago is not the only place where diorite is found in the world. True, the eastern islands here have some of the largest volcanic mountains, but there isn't anything inherently 'special' or 'supernatural' about the material. It's exotic, maybe, and speaks to a level of wealth, but it's not a magic rock," she said.

"So you think the Erysi had some kind of a ritual to animate the stone and create the kind of magnetism that we're seeing?" Max concluded.

"I'm not sure," Claudia admitted, knocking the heels of her boots to some unknown rhythm against the finished wood of the bench. "To be honest, Max, I don't know how to explain what we saw that day in the Museum. It should be impossible. There is no scientific way to explain what we saw, but does that mean that I immediately accept that the ancient deities the Erysi worshiped used these diorite statues as channels to have agency over our world? That these statues are somehow alive and by extension, that these gods are alive?"

"Can I see it?" Max asked, gesturing to the necklace. Tipping her hand, Claudia watched the pendant drop into his open palm. He turned it over several times, then paused half-turn and squinted. "There's something familiar about this shape," he said, raising the pendant up to catch the light flooding in from one of the portholes.

"Familiar? How so?"

The two of them leaned closer, cheeks nearly brushing against each other as Max brought the pendant up to eye-level. The greenish-black stone stared back at them, surface glossy with a high polish. Suddenly, Claudia felt a wave of vertigo wash over her, her vision swimming and temples bursting with jolts of pain. Beside her, Max seemed to be experiencing the same, his brow furrowed as his head dropped into his hand, a low groan escaping from his lips.

"It's an eye."

A deep voice appeared, followed by the smell of cigarettes. Claudia and Max both startled, looking up to see Barrett standing right in front of them. He carried a rucksack on one broad shoulder, but slumped it off rather haphazardly before returning his attention to the two of them, and the pendant still cradled in Max's hand.

"What did you just say?" Claudia asked, the throbbing in her head fading as she directed her eyes away from the pendant and towards the older man.

"It's an eye," Barrett repeated, the words forming around the cigarette in his mouth as smoke curled over his lips.

"What do you mean 'it's an eye'?"

Barrett hooked a finger on the silver chain and lifted the pendant up out of Max's hand, twisting his own around at the wrist to wind up the metal links until the pendant hung just below the heel of his hand.

"Interesting how the right eye of the Statue of Esus ended up hanging around a rich girl's neck," he said, then fixed his gaze on Claudia.

"The Statue of Esus? What are you talking about? The Statue of Esus was never reported to have a missing eye."

Barrett smirked, "Granite makes for a pretty good replacement."

"Are you saying that you took the eye?" Max asked. "Why would you do that?"

"For insurance," Barrett said. "An army pension wasn't going to do much good for someone like me."

"You fought in the war? But we won."

The older man's lips curled back into a sneer, "Don't say 'we won' as if you were there, boy. I knew what I was coming home to; no one has respect for a crippled soldier. They leave

you behind, leave you to rot. They sent us over to fight and then took credit for the victory. They'd welcome you back with open arms as long as you still have two working legs. But an amputee blind in one eye? No thanks." Claudia's eyes widened as she zeroed in on Barrett's clothed legs and then back up to his face, just now noticing the slight discoloration of his right eye.

"I'm confused," Max said, "what does this have to do with the Statue of Esus? Didn't Herman find both Eean and Esus thirty years ago? And if you were fighting in the war, how could you have gotten hold of the statue?"

"These islands were used as a base," Barrett replied, "We had to use Esus' temple since the bombing raids started targeting the royal city. Shrapnel blast killed most of my squadron. Got the news that we had won while lying drugged up on morphine, so once I got back, I made some connections and made it to an auction where the statue was being sold. I knew that my pension wasn't going to be enough to get me far, so I took out the eye before it was given to the top bidder. Got a decent price for selling it, too."

"Who did you sell it to?" Claudia questioned, holding in a breath.

Barrett flashed a wry grin, teeth "Who do you think, Miss Finch? Your daddy got out of service because he's rich, but he wanted some of the war booty anyway. He didn't want some precious artifact in the hands of a cripple and a morphine addict. I needed money and he wanted the eye, so I sold it to him. Gave me enough to get this taken care of," he said, rapping the back of his knuckles against his shin as the muffled sound of his prosthetic answered.

"My father knew what this was, he knew it was stolen and he bought it anyway?" Claudia asked, face pinching with disbelief. "He knows about provenance though. He honors it, he wouldn't have bought something knowing that it had been obtained illegally."

Barrett stared at her and shook the necklace for emphasis, pendant swinging like a maniac pendulum. “And yet, here we are.”

“That still doesn’t explain what you’re doing here,” Max frowned.

“A mother keeps those in her care within her sight,” Barrett said, puffing out another cloud of smoke, and turning the air in the cabin hazy. “This eye can help find the last statue. You two have already figured out that the stone attracts itself, so the statues are bonded together just as the Trinity is. They act like magnets pulling towards each other. This pendant is our compass.”

An hour later, the *Indiscretion* weighed anchor offshore and once again they used the motorboats to reach the dense forest that surrounded the base of the mountains. According to the map, the diorite deposits were located in the valley between the two main peaks. Shouldering their daypacks filled with food and water rations, they began the hike towards the first one. Almost immediately, Claudia’s walking skirt became a hindrance to her movement, catching on the undergrowth and slowing her down significantly.

“Hold on,” she said as she reached down for what seemed like the fiftieth time to detach the hem from a group of sharp rocks. Making a frustrated noise, she asked, “Does anyone have a knife?”

“What would you need a knife for?” Max asked, trying to disguise his labored breathing with a small laugh. Farther up the trail was Barrett who despite his prosthetic was still the fastest out of the party. Hearing Claudia’s request, he doubled back, the uneven gait becoming more pronounced as he walked downhill. He unsheathed a medium, serrated blade and handed it to her. Her fingers closed around the smooth, wrapped leather handle, the blade gleaming in the mid-day sun filtering through the canopy.

“Be careful,” Max warned.

She bent down, pulling the hem of her skirt taut with one hand and using the knife to cut a line upwards before she used both hands to begin ripping the fabric apart. A minute or two later, she stood back up, the remaining jagged hemline now level with her shins.

“Much better,” she said with a satisfied hum.

“I wonder if any of these volcanoes are still active,” Max said, gaze directed up towards the peak of the mountain ahead of them.

“I hope not,” she said, catching up to him.

As they hiked, Claudia found herself gnawing on her bottom lip, unable to forget what Barrett had said about her necklace. He had given it back to her following their conversation on the *Indiscretion*, which in all honesty, had surprised her. She tried to remember more about what her father had said when he had presented her with a wrapped box on her birthday. He hadn't told her what the pendant was, just that he thought it was the perfect gift for someone like her. At that point, she had already taken an interest in art history and archaeology, just like her father, and had convinced him to let her study the latter at university.

A perfect gift for someone like her.

Did he say that because he really knew what the pendant was? But why didn't he just tell her the truth? Claudia's head swam, her chest feeling tight as she tried to make sense of the things Barrett had revealed to her. Logically, she had no reason to trust him or anything he said, but emotionally, it made her pause and that made her uneasy.

Pre-occupied by her own thoughts, she moved in an almost robotic manner, Max's concerned brow at her silence occasionally coming into her periphery. Before she knew it, they had reached the summit and below them was the vast ancient quarry filled with diorite. It seemed to stretch on endlessly on either side, the greenish-black stone becoming a murky sea that split

the two mountains down the middle. As they walked through the quarry, Claudia reached out her hands to run against the surface of the unhewn stone left around her. In the less refined sections, she noticed speckles of white and gray. To her left, she saw the unfinished carving of a pillar, laying horizontal and only half-rounded from the block it was being carved from. Further away, she saw stacks of square-cut blocks each the size of her torso. A smaller stack beside them revealed smooth, sanded sides washing in a high polish that made the green-black hue glisten and shine.

Then, she heard Max calling, “Over here! I found something!”

They rushed towards him, gathering around a cleared, cylindrical area with the remains of an altar mounted on a set of circular steps. On both were etched markings and symbols, the largest of them was a circular ring with a triangle placed beneath it. There was also another inscription at the foot of the altar, but many of the words were too weathered to completely recognize them. There were only two words that Claudia could make out: *Erentas Sintae*. Blessed Summoning.

She and Max both immediately grabbed their journal and began feverishly writing down observations. As she recorded the inscription and the partial translation she had made, she also drew a sketch of the various symbols, specifically the ring and the triangle. It looked familiar to her, but she couldn't quite place where she had seen it before. Maybe the symbols would appear in the Temple of Esus and give them more clues about how to find the last statue. Beside her, Max had taken out his box camera and began to snap several photographs of the altar from all angles.

“How do you think this worked?” Max asked, gesturing to the elevated altar.

“I think I have an idea,” Claudia said before reaching into her blouse to retrieve the necklace. She held it out in the flat of her palm, the others watching as they held a collective breath. Then, she followed the Erysi words that she had recorded with her finger and read them out loud. They all watched the pendant intensely, attuned to even the smallest of movement, but nothing happened. She repeated the two words a few more times, but the pendant remained motionless in her hand.

“Are you sure you translated it right?” Barrett asked, crossing his arms.

“Of course I translated it right!” Claudia snapped.

He brought his hands up in a sign of surrender, “Easy there. You said there was an inscription, but part of it is missing. Maybe, it doesn’t do anything unless you say the full thing.”

Claudia pursed her lips, but he wasn’t wrong. It was entirely probable that the key to animating the stone was through saying the full inscription. She blew out a frustrated breath, marching back over to the foot of the altar before getting down on her hands and knees to brush away dirt and dust from the stone in an effort to make the rest of the words more legible, but all she could manage to decipher was the first few letters which could translate to a multitude of different things. Y-I-S

“It’s okay,” Max said, helping her back up to her feet. “The inscription and what you could translate definitely seems like they had a ritual for the stones.”

Barrett jerked his chin off towards the rest of the quarry, “Come on, we don’t have all day. Let’s see what else we can find here.”

Chapter 7

Despite spending the rest of the day searching the quarry and around the ritual site for evidence of the third statue, as per Barrett's suggestion, as the sun began to set in the valley, bathing them in golden light, it was clear that the Statue of Erys was not there. Still, Claudia felt somewhat satisfied that her theory had been right; there had been some kind of ritual that animated the stone. So, they made camp and returned empty-handed to the *Indiscretion* the following afternoon. Breckenworth had opted to take the remaining crew and make the trek to the southeast from the Temple of Eean to the ruins of the Erysi royal city. They had sent a radio message that they would meet up with him there.

"Tell me more about the catacombs," Max said as they headed for the southern island. "What's your plan when we get there?"

Claudia pulled out her journal, flipping pages until she came to the right one: she had transcribed notes about the known entrances Herman had discovered on his expedition and she had folded up a copy of the crude layout the previous explorer had made. The catacombs ran in a spiderweb of tunnels beneath the ancient city, spanning miles.

"The first known entrance is directly beneath the royal palace. And the Temple of Esus was built directly opposite the palace which is where Herman found another entrance. I think there is a pretty good chance that the last statue was hidden in that main tunnel running between the two," Claudia said.

"Wait," Max frowned, "didn't a lot of the catacomb tunnels collapse? How do you know that there is actually a clear path from the entrance that runs beneath the temple to the one that lies underneath the palace?"

Before Claudia could explain that Herman's team had noted no obstructions or structural dangers, Barrett stepped in. He crossed his arms over his chest and said, "That's what dynamite is for."

Max whipped his head over to look at the man incredulously, "Are you insane?"

"Will me saying yes make you shut up?" Barrett sneered.

"Forget it! I'm not going into a tunnel just for you to start blowing things up. You're going to get us killed down there."

"Look," Barrett snapped, "you're the one with the doubts that the tunnels are clear. Either trust that she's right or stop complaining." With that he stalked off, leaving the pair in the cabin.

Claudia touched Max's shoulder, feeling him tense under her hand. "Hey, I know that being underground is not your ideal choice. You don't have to go with us. You could try to look for clues in the temple or the palace instead? Or go up north and get started on where you think the statue is."

After a moment, Max blew out a breath, then straightened his back, "No, I'll go with you. I still don't trust Barrett with dynamite and I'd rather be there in case you need help than stay above ground."

Claudia nudged him and made an exaggerated pout, "Aw, you care about me? Your fiance? I'm flattered." Max chuckled, his tense expression melting into an easy smile and Claudia found herself smiling along with him. She gave him another light pat on the shoulder, "Thank you though."

"Of course, I have to keep us safe. It wouldn't be very good press if we wind up dead," he joked.

Breckenworth waved them over once they landed on the southern island.

“Did you find anything in the quarry?” he asked as they followed him and the rest of the crew into the remains of the royal city. Claudia shook her head, but was instantly distracted by the scene before her.

Crumbling structures ruined by war both ancient and modern stood like skeletons of a once flourishing city. The roads were pox-marked with craters left behind from the bombings, leaving the earth permanently blackened and scorched in places. They approached the Temple of Esus, a structure made entirely of diorite that stood relatively unscathed. It towered overhead, similar in design to the Temple of Eean, though the latter had been carved out of the natural hillside and only had diorite finishing on the interior. While the Temple of Esus was impressive in its height and size, it did not feel overbearing to Claudia. Instead, she felt protected by it as it shaded her from the heat and gave her reprieve from the unending humidity.

Entering the temple conjured up the same feelings inside of her: a mixture of excitement and trepidation. An awareness that she was entering houses of gods that were impossibly alive. Each step was taken with a held breath, her chest aching as she, Max, Breckenworth, and Barrett made their way deeper inside until they reached a near identical altar room. Like the Temple of Eean, the structure ended in a cylindrical room lined with pillars and high relief carvings that now depicted the life of Esus and her union with Erys. Claudia approached the reliefs, recognizing that like at the Temple of Eean, there was a continuous inscription that repeated around the room. She traced the words, mouthing them out as she opened up her journal to record and translate it.

“Is this another incantation, do you think?” Max said, coming up next to her. She nodded, scribbling down the translated lines of text before reading it out loud.

“The divine mother of Eean and husband of Erys, Esus, god of the sea, harbinger of life resides here. May she watch over us dutifully, like a mother watches over her children. May she bless us forevermore.”

“It sounds similar to the one from Eean’s temple,” he observed once she had finished reading her translation.

“Yes, I think it’s intentional. There’s enough variation that seems to pertain directly to Esus, but the overall structure of the inscription is nearly identical to the one for Eean,” Claudia said.

“So, where is the catacomb entrance?” Barrett interrupted. Beckoning them with a wrinkled hand, Breckenworth walked over to a panel that stood between two pillars depicting Esus underwater amongst a cluster of sea creatures, the flowing tendrils of her hair like strands of sea grass swaying in the current. With a low grunt, Breckenworth pushed against one side of the panel until it gave way, pivoting around an axis to reveal a path behind it.

“Woah,” Claudia exhaled, eyes going wide. They carried their kerosene lanterns with them as the catacombs were completely devoid of light. Occasionally there would be a charred stump of a torch that they could reignite which only proved to make the catacombs all the more eerie. Their footsteps echoed and ricocheted off the walls, but the air was still, dead. Max walked beside her, back stiff and lips pressed together. Mixing in with the echoing foot falls, she could hear his breathing turning more shallow by the second.

She glanced over at him, “Are you alright, Max?” He gave her a nod, more jerk than nod given the stiffness of his neck. “Are you sure? You’re shaking,” she said quietly, reaching out to place a hand on his shoulder.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Let’s just keep going.” She took in his hunched, tense posture and darting eyes, unconvinced, but he insisted, urging them along to rejoin the group a little ways ahead. A few minutes later, they came to a crossroad: branching off from the main path were two tunnels leading in opposite directions. They held their lanterns up to try to see if there were any signs to indicate which tunnel they should take but only darkness stared back at them.

“Let’s split up,” Barrett said, though the way he said it left little room for negotiation. Claudia could almost picture him barking orders at other soldiers in uniform, though she realized he had never told them his rank.

“Absolutely not,” Max shook his head.

“We’re both looking for the same thing. It’s faster and more efficient if we split up. We can cover more ground,” Barrett retorted. He divided them quickly into two groups: him, Breckenworth and half of the crew headed towards the left tunnel while Max, Claudia and the rest of the crew headed towards the right.

Claudia set her lantern down and pulled out the map again, trying to judge how far into the catacombs they had traveled. Any large form in her immediate line of sight looked like it was the last statue, but upon closer inspection revealed itself to be merely crumbling bricks or a stack of stones piled up against the wall.

Then, they came to a literal wall, or a collapsed one. Either way, the bricks and stone lay in a massive, unmovable heap across the rest of the path, like the catacombs’ entrails had been strewn across the ground. The heap rose higher than any of them, but there was not enough space between the top of the heap and the ceiling for them to fit through.

“What should we do?” Claudia asked. “Should we circle back and find Barret’s group in the other tunnel?”

A crew member shook his head, “No, Barrett gave us all the supplies needed to get this cleared away.” Claudia and Max both stiffened as they watched other crew members begin to place sticks of dynamite in the heap of brick and stone standing before them.

“Come on, let’s move out of the way,” she said to him before they jogged back towards the beginning of the tunnel along with the rest of the crew.

“Fire in the hole!” a crew member yelled. Moments later, a thunderous *boom* echoed and debris showered down onto their heads. Claudia had clamped her hands tightly over her ears, but still, the explosion shuddered through her brain and body, her knees locking as the ground shook beneath her. It took several seconds for the ground to settle, and she took a tentative breath, slowly lowering her hands.

Suddenly, a great, splintering noise ricocheted off the walls, the sound like a sheet of ice shattering. There was a rumbling and even in the half-lit tunnel, Claudia could see clouds of dust flying up, directing all of their eyes up in horror to see the ceiling above them begin to buckle. More debris and loose stone hailed down on them, knocking the lanterns over, flames licking across the crumbling floors as kerosene spilled. The crew was screaming, men pushing and shoving to get away, to get out as the tunnel began to collapse on top of them. Someone shoved past her, a stray elbow catching her in the ribs and she felt herself stumbling, knocking into Max who had gone rigid as a corpse.

“Max, come on!” she yelled, grabbing his wrist and yanking him from where he stood frozen. It was like he was a man possessed, his limbs unlocking at record speed as he quickly outpaced her, the two of them sprinting for the exit.

They didn’t make it.

Another crew member pushed past them, shoving them so hard their steps faltered as they fought to keep upright, ankles jolting alight with pain as they slammed into the side of the tunnel and it gave way, the two pitching forward into complete darkness as the catacombs shook and crumbled until everything became still once more.

Claudia had fallen onto her side and she groaned as pain laced up her ribs. Her ears were ringing, lungs too filled with dust to take in a full breath. The kerosene lantern that she had been holding had fallen a couple feet away, but somehow survived it, the glass was cracked but not broken and a flame still flickered weakly inside. It offered just enough light to make out Max on his hands and knees, head hanging limp behind his shoulder blades. An awful feeling twisted in Claudia's gut as she tried to nudge him with her foot. He didn't move, just uttered a low sound.

“Max,” she said, voice ragged. “Can you hear me? Are you alright?”

He turned to her to face her fully, mouth opening and closing as if to try to draw in air, but the only sound that came off was the strangled gasping. The light from the lantern reflected off the whites of his eyes as he clutched at his heart, fingers ripping into fabric as if something was choking him.

“What is it? Max, are you hurt? What's going on?” Claudia struggled to sit up to go to him.

“C-c-can't-” he forced out, the veins in his neck pulsing. Tears were streaming down his face, making wet trails on his dirtied cheeks, but he seemed completely unaware of anything around him. She didn't know what was happening, her head swam as she tried to see if he was bleeding or injured anywhere.

“Can't what? Let me help you, it's going to be alright.” She didn't know that, she couldn't promise that, but it felt like something she needed to say. He started to dry heave,

hunched over the ground as sobs began wracking his body, then rolled over and collapsed against the wall.

“We’re going to die here,” he gasped between sobs, tears spilling from his eyes. Cradling her bruised side, Claudia scooted to sit beside him, then reached out and took his hand in hers.

“We’re not going to die,” Claudia said, her voice soft, “I promise.”

Both had no reason to believe it, but neither wanted to refute it.

Sitting shoulder to shoulder, Claudia could feel how badly he was trembling. She thought back to the time Max had gotten scared in the elevator at the Archives, how he had felt claustrophobic. She couldn’t imagine how scared he must be feeling now, and found herself squeezing his palm tighter. They sat in silence, but Claudia began encouraging him to mimic her breathing, matching the inhales and exhales to little squeezes of his hand. He was still hyperventilating, eyes wide with fear, the short gasps for breath slowly, with Claudia’s non-verbal prompting, slowly evened out to deeper inhalations and exhalations. After several minutes, he scrubbed at his face to brush away his tears and stared ahead with a gaze that was hollow and unseeing.

“Max?” she asked tentatively, voice cracking from disuse. He did not make a sound, but his head turned back to look at her in acknowledgement. She continued, “I’m sorry that I made you come down. I just, I really thought that the last statue was in here. But, I’m going to get us out, okay?”

She used the wall as support as she stood up, her head feeling more able to take in their current surroundings. It looked like they had fallen into a small alcove room offshooting from the tunnel they were in. The crumbling remains of the tunnel had spilled into the room’s entryway, but it looked like maybe with his help, they could dig or clear a path out of this room and back to

the main tunnel. She remembered seeing the warm glow of the kerosene lanterns their whole party, Barrett and Breckenworth alike, had left at the splitting of the two tunnel paths, so they had been close to the exit. Yet, as she went to pick up the lantern to illuminate how much debris was blocking their path, something on the opposite wall caught her eye. The edge of a drawing, crude lines with no color, as if made with the end of a charred stick.

“What-” she started to say, raising the lantern up to reveal more of it. Covering the wall in front of them was an array of drawings that seemed to be telling some kind of story. It showed the curved spine of the archipelago and three large figures that Claudia recognized as the trinity. Then, drawn above the trinity was a ring with a triangle underneath it, the exact same symbol she had seen at the ritual site. The final drawing showed shapes of the archipelago that were smeared out with what looked like ash. Etched crudely into the wall was a single word that immediately sent a wave of unease through her. *Yisa*. Maw. Maw? Like a mouth? Mouth of what? Maybe she had translated it wrong, though the closest word in English that she could think of being synonymous with it was opening. She stepped back to get a better view of the drawings as a whole and felt something crack under the heel of her boot. She looked down, saw the glistening white of a skull and let out a scream. It was unmistakably human. Something bad happened on these islands, something catastrophic.

In the distance, she heard people calling her and Max’s name, the muffled sound of shovels and pickaxes drawing closer.

“Finch! Hawthorne!”

“In here, please!” Claudia cried, feeling suddenly nauseous. What felt like hours later, Barrett appeared in the entryway of the alcove, crew members behind him still shoveling away rubble. “Oh thank God, get us out of here, please!”

Despite all three being in various levels of shock and panic, Barrett's lips twitched into a ghost of a smile, "Name's Barrett, but 'God' is fine too." Claudia couldn't tell if she wanted to laugh or cry, so she did both. She took Max's hand, squeezing tight as they followed Barrett out of the alcove, out of the collapsed tunnel, and after a while back into the Temple of Esus and outside. It was almost sundown and they had made a makeshift campsite outside the temple. Breckenworth immediately rushed over to them, embracing her with worry etched deep into the lines of his face.

"I saw something in the room we were in," Claudia murmured against his shoulder.

"You saw something?" he prompted, pulling back to look at her.

"It was a series of drawings that showed some massive disaster happening over the whole archipelago. And the statues, it looked like the statues were the cause of it," she said, voice unsteady. "I saw a word etched into the wall too."

"What did it say?"

"*Yisa*, it means maw, or mouth. I don't know," she shook her head. "I think that word has something to do with the disaster, but I don't know how a mouth could mean that level of destruction."

Breckenworth paused, then his expression changed into a different kind of relief. She frowned, not knowing how to understand it.

"Good, so there is proof in the catacombs, just as I thought," he said,

Claudia was becoming more confused, "What are you talking about, professor? Proof of what?"

"The end of the Erysi. Their civilization did not fall due to war or invasion, it was the statues. These people summoned the powers of the gods, summoned a portal, a mouth, as you

just told me, that ultimately destroyed them,” Breckenworth said. Claudia stilled: his research on creating a chronology for the fall of the Erysi.

“So you’re just here to prove your theory then?”

“I’m here in the pursuit of academic knowledge, Miss Finch,” Breckenworth sniffed, “So are you.”

“We could’ve died in there,” she exclaimed, taken aback by Breckenworth’s change in attitude. “If we had died, would that be the cost to prove your theory was right and for your research to be published?” She didn’t wait for him to answer, suddenly too angry and too shaken from what she and Max had gone through. “If you want to stay here and test out more of your theories, that’s fine, but I’m going back to the ship with Max.”

“You thought the last statue was in the catacombs, didn’t you?” Breckenworth said as she began to walk away.

“We didn’t find it, if that’s what you’re asking,” she replied before turning to rejoin Max as they, along with the other injured members of the crew headed back for the *Indiscretion*.

Chapter 8

“I’m sorry,” Claudia apologized to Max again. After bandaging up the more superficial cuts and scrapes, they went below deck and sat beside each other in the cabin. Max had been quiet since the tunnels, visibly shaken and still not fully there. He flinched at any loud noise and it struck a pang of guilt through her to see him and know that she had partially been the reason why he had gone down there to begin with.

“It’s okay,” he spoke. “I just want to find it and go home.”

Claudia gave a sigh, “I know, I do too. But I think we both had a hard day today, especially you. Why don’t we rest tomorrow and then get back to searching?”

“I already gave the captain the coordinates for the northern island,” Max shook his head. The ship began to move, the steady chugging of the engine propelling them across the water. “I picked a trawler for a reason.”

“What do you mean?” Claudia asked.

“Once we get closer, they’ll cast trawling nets and see if we can get anything. We also have diving gear once we find the temple itself,” he said, crossing his arms tightly over his torso.

“Are you going to be okay?” she said, noting his tense body language. “You know, you don’t have to go diving for it yourself. We can instruct the crew to help us.”

Max exhaled, slumping back against the cabin wall. “Is it stupid that I want to be the one that finds it?”

“Stupid, no? Maybe a little unfair, but it’s not stupid,” she replied, chest warming at the wry smile on his lips at her crack.

He uncrossed his arms, “Remember how I told you that this feels like it’s in my blood, exploration, finding lost things?” Claudia nodded. “It’s just that my father went on Herman’s expedition and found Erysi relics that people like Breckenworth and Goldberg make a living studying. My eldest brother went on another expedition, somewhere in the east, before the war, and he found things that were thousands of years old. Even my middle brother, curated a private collection of Irena ornamental jewelry that gets exhibited all over the country. So, if I don’t find something worthy, something valuable, some lost thing that goes beyond our imaginations, what was it all for?”

Claudia said, “Well, maybe it means this wasn’t what you were meant to do.”

“That’s exactly what I’m afraid of,” he exclaimed. “How can I be a Hawthorne if-”

“If what?” she countered, “If you don’t find the Statue of Erys? Max, you asked what this was all for, and for me, I would say that this is something I’ve been fascinated with for a long time. I want to find the statue because I’m a scholar, both of us are, and finding things lost to us is like being able to learn a foreign language, it unlocks a secret of the world to us. And maybe, that can be enough of a reason.”

“Yeah, that’s true,” Max said, then shot her a look. “Well, let’s just hope my lead goes better than yours.” Claudia snorted, but it made her feel better that Max was in the mood for banter.

“We have at least another couple of hours before we get there, so why don’t we try to get a little bit of rest?” she suggested. Max nodded in agreement and handed her a blanket from one of the cubbies before grabbing one for himself. They fell asleep lulled by the sound of the waves and the occasional coo of an Erysi bird of paradise in the distance.

When they were approximately in range of the northern island, the captain gave the order to cast the trawling nets. Having woken up from their nap minutes before, Claudia and Max scrambled to leave the cabin and climb up onto the deck to see, but they were met with pitch black darkness. Night had fallen fast since they left the royal city and it was so dark that it was virtually impossible to see where the sky ended and the sea began. The feeling was as crushing as it was dizzying, having no way to orient oneself. It made Claudia's chest contract, and she suddenly felt incredibly insignificant. Small and mortal in comparison to the natural, unforgiving forces around her. The sky and sea did not care who she was or why she was here. And there was no sun or moon to look up towards to guide her, to make her feel less alone.

Thankfully, the overhead lights attached to the front of the trawler gave off a small amount of light on deck, but still, Claudia found herself extending a hand out towards Max to ground herself. A moment later, his hand grasped hers and she left out a breath. She didn't have to ask him whether he too was trying not to think about the crushing black of the catacombs after they collapsed on top of them, she could feel it in his pulse, in the slight clammy feel of his palm against hers.

"Any sign?" a crew member called out.

"Not yet!" came the answer.

In an effort to distract herself from her thoughts, Claudia brought her fingers up to her collar, reaching for the chain of her necklace only to feel nothing there. She inhaled sharply, removing her hand from Max's to feel around her neck again, even unbuttoning the top of her blouse and looking down to see the empty space between her breastbone.

"It's not here," she said, looking up at Max.

"What's not?"

“The necklace, the Eye of Esus,” she explained, hands gesturing in the air, “I-I don’t know where it is. It’s always around my neck.”

“Did you check your pockets? Or maybe it’s still in the cabin?” Max suggested. He then asked one of the crew members if they had a couple of flashlights to spare. A few minutes later, he was handed two flashlights, and he gave one to Claudia as they turned them on, immediately aiming the beams at the ground around them to see if the necklace had fallen off onto the deck. Their search of the cabin came up empty as well.

Claudia chewed on the inside of her cheek. “I just hope I didn’t lose it in the catacombs.” They ended up radioing a message to Breckenworth and Barrett who were both still at the royal city. An hour later, the response came. Breckenworth explained that Barrett had found the necklace on the ground in the room Claudia and Max were in after the tunnel collapsed, and that they could give it back to her in the morning. Of course, neither of the men knew that the two of them were no longer docked offshore, but rather hundreds of miles away, dredging for where the Temple of Erys had sunk into the depths of the ocean.

Just as dawn broke over the horizon, the crew shouted that the nets were caught on something. The captain barked an order to reel them in, and Claudia and Max quickly ran over to the opposite rail to see where two men on either side of a massive crank worked together to pull the nets up. However, after about three full rotations of the crank wheels, the metal arm that connected to the trawling nets groaned in protest. The men strained their muscles as they yanked at the crank wheels, the veins in their arms and necks popping, but to no avail. Something was definitely down there. Something had caught in the net.

“Captain,” Max called to the man at the helm. “I think we might have found something. Can we ready the diving gear? I want to go down and see.”

Claudia tugged on his arm, her lips pursed with worry, “Are you sure that’s a good idea, Max? Going down there?”

Max’s jaw was tight as he looked at her. “I have to, Claudia. I just-I need to know if I’m right.”

“Fine, but if you’re going, then I am too,” she said.

“No, you’re not,” Max shook his head, “it’s too dangerous.”

She snorted, “Oh, now you’re going to play the ‘it’s too dangerous’ card? We almost died yesterday.”

“Exactly,” he retorted. “We almost died yesterday. I’m not about to let you put yourself in danger again just to keep me company.”

“Do you trust me?” she asked him. He nodded. “Then, trust that I’m not just going down there to keep you company or as some act of sacrifice. I want to go because I want to find the statue just like you. Working together just makes more sense; I’ll have your back and you’ll have mine, alright?”

After several seconds, Max let out a sigh. “Fine, but if things become dangerous, we’re leaving, agreed?”

Claudia threw him a cheeky grin, “Oh, come on, Max. Are we really on an adventure if things don’t become a little dangerous?”

“I’m serious, Claudia,” he said, “I don’t want you to get hurt again.” His face held such a caring and concerned expression that Claudia felt her ears grow warm, now extremely aware of the ring she wore on her hand. She knew neither of them felt romantic attraction towards the other, but still, his expression and the genuine display of emotion on his face suddenly felt too intimate. She wasn’t used to getting so emotionally invested with other people—her parents were

neither affectionate nor genuine with their emotions. They kind of just saw her as there, a daughter in title, but not much else. She felt the same with her school friends, who, when she really thought about it, were all more like academic rivals to her than friends. Even Breckenworth, the only person that Claudia did feel cared about her, was ultimately more mentor than friend as well.

“Careful, Max, ” she replied, voice light to distract from the tautness in her chest. “People will think you actually care for me.”

“I do care for you,” Max said, surprising her. “You’re my friend.”

“Why?” Claudia asked.

“Well, I know we haven’t known each other for that long, and our arrangement is a bit unconventional, but beyond our common interests as scholars, I really do care about you, Claudia, and I feel like I’ve gotten to know you better.

“Because I’m also a scholar?”

Max gave her shoulder a little nudge, “Yes, we’re both scholars and that’s how I first got to know you, but I’ve also learned that you’re passionate and ambitious, but not selfish. You do want to find this statue, but not at the cost of people’s lives. You could’ve just left me in that tunnel, you really could have, but you didn’t. You stayed with me, and that mattered to me. I trust you and I care about you, isn’t that what friends do?”

Claudia paused, not quite expecting the admission. She thought about how in the past couple of weeks, they had indeed grown closer, and had shared experiences on their so-called adventure. They had learned to trust each other, first as scholars and then as people. So, while she didn’t expect him to say it, there was a warmth blooming in her chest at the knowledge that

he considered her a friend, and she felt the urge to tell him that she, too, had come to see him as the same.

“Let’s just find this damn thing already,” she said, blowing out a breath, then in a softer voice, she looked at him and said, “But thank you, Max.”

“Of course, Claudia,” he said with a smile. Then, as if he noticed her slight discomfort with the intimacy of the conversation, joked, “Do you want to make a bet to see who can get into their diving suit first?”

Made from water-proofed canvas, the diving suits were bulky and cumbersome to get into. Crew members helped them strap lead-weighted shoes onto their feet before securing their diving helmets to the ringed opening at the top of the suits. The copper helmets had a small, circular glass panel to allow them to see, and Claudia immediately felt a light rush of air enter into the head piece from a manual pump that stood towards the end of the ship.

“Ready?” came the muffled sound of Max’s voice beside her. She tried to nod, but the weight of the helmet nearly made her pitch forward, so she settled for giving him a thumbs up instead. Finally, the crew attached a length of rope to the belt of each of their suits so that the two would have a way to signal for help or to indicate that they wanted to be pulled back up.

The entry into the water barely registered to Claudia as they instantly began to sink down, down, their lead-lined shoes pulling them towards the sea floor. She couldn’t see the current, but she could see what the trawling nets had caught on: there, sitting at the bottom of the sea was a structure made from pure diorite, the greenish-black stone glittering as the first rays of sunlight filtered down from the surface. There was the Temple of Erys.

She looked through the glass panel in front of her face to see schools of brightly-scaled fish swimming around the stone columns and darting into the vast fields of sea grass beyond

where the temple stood. She stifled a gasp as a shark passed by the entrance before moving along. Clusters of coral and sea anemones interrupted the blue of the water and the black of the diorite. Claudia and Max landed a little ways from the temple entrance, movement restrained and slow. It took all her concentration to lift one foot in front of the other, keeping herself upright as they walked across the sea floor, watching as crustaceans scuttled out of their way.

At last, they came to the towering entrance of the Temple of Erys. It was larger than both the Temple of Eean and Esus, yet similar in structure. The two of them made their way inside, following the pillared hall lined with long extinguished torches until they came to a hollowed out, cylindrical area decorated with intricate reliefs of the life of Erys, god of the sky, and his union with Esus. The inscription that went around the circumference of the altar room was so weathered and eroded by water that Claudia could barely make out half of the words, much less give a complete translation; she translated what she could, filling in the gaps from what she could remember of the inscriptions she had found in the two other temples⁷.

Out of her limited line of sight, she noticed Max's arms waving, albeit in slow-motion due to moving through water, and turned to see what he was gesturing to. Admittedly, she had gotten so used to seeing an empty pedestal where the two hemispheres of the room met, that it took a moment for what stood before them to actually register. Staring at them with unseeing yet all-seeing eyes, was the Statue of Erys. The god of the sky stood at an impressive height, broad shoulders pulled back to emphasize his regal posture. His right hand was held in front of his chest, index finger extended to point upwards. Atop his head, he wore a crown that resembled the rays of the sun, his robed garments gathering like storm clouds. His expression was firm, but not austere, lips forming just the barely hint of a smile.

⁷ "*Erys un eloch Ere...un Esus entae un...Erys un eloch mas in Ere...ut Erentas...*" Roughly translated to "Erys, god of the sky...to Esus, father to...Erys lords over all above us...his blessing..."

They had found it. They had finally found it.

Max gestured upwards to mean that they should return to the surface and inform the captain and the crew of their discovery. So, taking the lines of rope that had been hooked onto their belt, the two of them tugged, twice, the signal for them to come back up. As they broke the surface, a ladder was lowered for them to climb back onto deck. Once their helmets were off, Max was the first to blurt out the news to the captain who was quick to radio Breckenworth and Barrett to relay the message.

“We need a couple lines of rope for us to secure the statue,” Max explained hurriedly to the group around them. “And then, we can bring it up.”

Minutes later, the captain approached her and said, “Miss Finch, we just got an urgent radio message from Breckenworth.”

“What's wrong?” Claudia asked, stomach beginning to churn with anxiety. Had another tunnel collapsed? Was he injured? Breckenworth and Barrett had said that they were going to continue to search for the statue in the catacombs under the royal palace.

“He needs your help. Something about a ritual site,” the captain explained.

“The ritual site? But that’s on the eastern island.”

“What is it?” Max asked, noticing the exchange and coming up beside her.

She turned to him and said, “Apparently, Breckenworth needs my help at the ritual site.”

“You mean the one you found at the diorite deposits? Why would he be there? I thought he and Barrett were still in the royal city.”

Claudia shrugged, “I don’t know, but it’s urgent. I want to make sure they’re alright.”

“Do you want to bring the statue up and then head for the eastern island?” he asked.

She shook her head, “No, you stay here and get the statue. I’ll take one of the motor boats and find out what’s going on with them, then I’ll meet you back here, okay?”

“Okay, but be careful,” he said. Then, he brought her into a hug. Claudia froze momentarily, the gesture completely catching her off guard. Her head was tucked perfectly underneath his chin and she could hear his steady heartbeat from where her ear was pressed against his chest.

Tentatively, she wrapped her arms around him too, squeezing gently. “I will,” she said, letting Max squeeze her tighter before letting her go.

Chapter 9

At Max's insistence, two crew members accompanied Claudia on the motorboat ride to the eastern island. Conversation was muted, the chuffing of the engine filling the silence as they cut through the waves. The morning sun was rising up overhead, turning the water a brilliant blue once more. Claudia sat in the middle of the boat, wringing her hands in the strap of her satchel, her skin itching with unease. Something felt wrong, she couldn't explain what, but the air felt like it was weighing down on her, so heavy with humidity that she felt like her lungs were sticking. She braced a hand over her brow to look at the sky, half-expecting to see storm clouds forming, but there was no such evidence; the only clouds in the sky were wisps of white that seemed to dissipate as rays of sunlight hit them.

She chewed on her bottom lip, still trying to figure out why Breckenworth and Barrett would be at the ritual site. And why would they need her for that matter? The only logical conclusion she could think of was that she was the only one in their party that was fluent in Erysi, and the ritual site had had some kind of inscription in the ancient language, so maybe they needed her help translating something. Though, she didn't know why an abandoned ritual site would be of help to Breckenworth's research or his want to prove his theory on the end of the Erysi. Something else nibbled at her memory of the ritual site; there had been some symbols etched into the stone, a ring and a triangle, and Claudia found herself digging for her journal to see her notes from that day. Only, her journal was not in her satchel. She took the bag off, opening it fully to rummage through the contents in a rushed manner, but the bound book was not there. She must have left it in the cabin of the *Indiscretion*, not wanting to risk it getting wet when she and Max had dove down to the Temple of Erys.

She and the crew members made the trek back up the mountain and to the valley below where the diorite quarry sat. She could see Breckenworth and Barrett, along with more crew members that had stayed behind gathered around the ritual site. Once they saw her approach, Breckenworth waved her over in an almost frenzied manner.

“Professor Breckenworth,” she said by way of greeting, coming to embrace him. “What’s going on? Is everything alright, the captain told me that you needed my help.”

“You found it, didn’t you?” he said, holding her by the shoulders rather tightly. “You found the Statue of Erys.”

She nodded, “Yes, Max is back on the ship and they’re going to help him bring it aboard.” Then she smiled, “We did it. We actually found it.”

Breckenworth grinned, but his eyes were fervent and filled with a feverish light. “Excellent, Claudia. Now, Barrett told me that you were able to translate the inscription here.” He led her over to where Barret stood at the foot of the stone altar.

“Well, not all of it,” she clarified, “I couldn’t make out some of the words, they were too worn away. Is this what you needed my help with?”

“No, actually, I was wondering if you could tell me about your theory with the ritual site. How do you think it was used?” he asked.

“Well, I think that the statues are all compelled to attract each other, and I think that this altar and possibly this inscription allowed for the Erysi to not only animate the diorite stone, but turn them into conduits for the Trinity to use.”

“Did you try it?”

“I tried to, but nothing happened. I think it was because some of the words are too worn away to make out,” she said.

Breckenworth stroked his mustache. “So, we need to recite the full incantation for the ritual to work?”

“Yes, but like I said, I don’t think we’ll be able to see the full inscription on the altar.”

“Barrett and I were able to recover the rest,” the professor said, brushing her off.

“What? You were?”

“Yes, we just can’t read what it says.”

Claudia came around to where she recalled the inscription to be, sinking down onto her hands and knees once more to trace over the letters. *Erentas Sintae Yisa*. Blessed Summoning Maw. Or opening. Oh God.

“Can you read it now?”

“Why do you need me to read it?” she asked, sitting back on her heels to look up at the professor.

“Well, because I want to see if the ritual works. If it will animate the statues.”

“But the Statue of Erysi isn’t here, and neither are the Statues of Esus and Ean. You see this symbol right here,” she pointed to the ring with the triangle beneath it. “I think this means that the Trinity, or the three statues of the Trinity need to be in place for this ritual to work.”

“I’ve placed the Statue of Esus and Ean back in their temples, and now that you’ve found the last statue, we can try to replicate the ritual,” he said, his gaze growing more and more intense.

“What are you talking about? The Statues of Esus and Ean are back in the city.”

Breckenworth rambled on, “I brought them here, I needed them to be brought together. That was how the Erysi used them. They needed them, they needed all three for them for the Trinity to come.”

Claudia's eyes widened in horror. "Are you crazy? You want to replicate the portals? Isn't that what you said caused the end of the Erysi? Why would you want to recreate that?"

"I need to know if I'm right, Claudia," Breckenworth insisted. "Besides, the Erysi clearly weren't worthy of the Trinity's power and thus, deserved to die. Us on the other hand, intellectuals and academics that have the intelligence to fully understand and utilize this power, we are worthy of it."

Claudia shook her head violently. "No, I'm not going to read this out loud. If that is your plan! You want to recreate the portal that you think caused the mass destruction and end to an entire civilization? For what? To prove your theory is right? To write a book? No, I'm not telling you how to say it."

"Claudia," Breckenworth growled. "Just do it. I need to know if it works."

"No!"

"Fine, I'll do it myself!"

Breckenworth began to say the three words in various different ways, pronouncing them all differently, until to Claudia's horror, his lips finally formed around the last syllable of Yisa, changing the short "a" sound to a long "a". It was as if something settled in the air and for a moment, Claudia hoped that nothing would happen, that the myth was just a myth and nothing more. However, it didn't seem to matter whether the words had been silent or read out loud. The gods hear their summoning.

The earth gave a groan, like splintering ice and wood, a shriek that shook Claudia to her core. The quarry began to tremble and then all at once, before she could even scream, the sound was ripped from her throat as the ground fell away from under their feet and she was plummeting into an endless chasm below.

Epilogue

Two months have passed since the disaster at the Erysi Archipelago. A thick layer of snow had fallen over the city, blanketing it in white only to be turned a sooty black from the exhaust fumes of stalled cars. There was a stinging coldness that bit at the nose and ears, and the absence of warmth in the air felt like a wound. Maxwell Hawthorne stood outside the grand building of the Hawthorne Historical Society and blew into his cupped hands, trying to rid the numbness in his fingers and in his chest. At last, he took hold of the ornate metal door handle, pulling it open and walking inside. He was met with a wave of heat coming from the radiators and the sudden increase of temperature felt like a slap to the face. Bits of snow fell from his coat and melted onto the oriental rug that covered the wooden floors. He crossed the main hall, passing the myriad of glass display cases filled with shiny artifacts without so much as a second glance until he came to a double-breasted door. A suited man that he did not recognize stood outside and as he approached, the man opened the door, allowing him to enter.

Every member of the senior board of the Hawthorne Historical Society was present and stared at him with stony expressions. He faced them all, a tightness in his ribs as he prepared to formally and officially explain to the Society what exactly had led to the deaths of Claudia Finch, Professor Breckenworth, Sean Barrett, and around half of the crew of the *Indiscretion*. He raised his chin to look them in the eyes, seeing his father and his mother seated next to each other, his brothers next to her, and Mr. and Mrs. Finch sitting farther down the table, and then finally, Mr. Goldberg at the very end.

“You may begin,” his father said curtly.

From the inside of his jacket, Max took out a bound leather journal and held it in his hands, steeling himself against the guilt and the sadness that sank their teeth into his body.

“Claudia and I wanted to find the lost Statue of Erys, so when we got to the Peninsula for our engagement celebration, I chartered a trawler, the *Indiscretion*, and we left for the Erysi Archipelago ten days before we were due back to the city. Neither of us knew at the time, but Professor Breckenworth had hired Sean Barrett, a war veteran and a treasurer hunter, to assist him in finding the statue as well. He had also brought the two other statues of Esus and Eean with him, but we didn’t know that he had done this,” he said.

Edmund Hawthorne raised a brow and asked, “Why did he bring them back to the Archipelago? Wasn’t the whole point to find the last statue and bring it back here?”

Max replied, “Professor Breckenworth was working on a research project that involved creating a chronology of the end to the Erysi. He had a theory that the statues, when brought together and used in a ritual, resulted in a catastrophic disaster that spread across all of the islands and wiped out the population. He believed that this is what the Erysi described as portals. He brought the Statues of Esus and Eean back to the islands so that when we found the Statue of Erys, he could try to recreate the portal and prove his theory.”

“So, did you find the Statue of Erys?” Goldberg spoke up, eyebrows twitching.

Max nodded, “Yes, Claudia and I dove underwater to where the northern island had sunk due to a shift in the plates. There, we found the Temple of Erys intact and inside, the last statue. However, the captain had informed Breckenworth that we had found it, and he in turn messaged that he needed Claudia’s help at the ritual site on the eastern island.”

“Ritual site?” another board member tugged on his beard.

“We found evidence of an altar and a ritual site at the diorite deposits on the eastern island. Claudia theorized that there was some kind of incantation that was spoken to animate the diorite and give the statues their powers as conduits,” Max explained. “So, Claudia left with a couple crew members to help Breckenworth. And then,” he paused, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he tried to swallow around the hard lump forming in his throat. He gazed at the board of people in front of him, but saw none of them. “Then, the entire archipelago disappeared.”

“What do you mean it disappeared?” Mrs. Finch said icily, her eyes piercing.

“We felt a wave of vertigo, I knew it had to have been the statues, and then the entire thing vanished into the ocean. Every island that we could see from the ship vanished in a blink of an eye. It happened so fast, we almost capsized from the waves that came up when the islands disappeared. I tried radioing, we all did, but no one answered. Once the waves had settled, we even searched for any sign of them, Claudia, Breckenworth, Barrett, anyone. Nothing. Nothing was there anymore.”

“That’s impossible. You’re lying,” Mrs. Finch snapped, her voice shrill.

“I’m not,” Max said simply. “The archipelago is located in an area that has frequent shifts in the plates. The myth of the portals and the divine power of the statues that summoned them might be true, but it might also be true that calling it so was the only way the Erysi could have understood the phenomenon. All I know is that the islands are gone and so are all of those who were still on them. I’m sorry, I couldn’t save them. I’m sorry I couldn’t save *her*.”

“So, what you’re saying is that you found one of the most famous lost treasures of the world and then lost it due to a shift in the plates, and now, there is no possible way to ever find it again?” his father said, the vein in his temple pulsing.

Max lifted his chin and retorted, “Maybe it’s because it was never ours to begin with.”

“Excuse me?”

“Maybe,” he said, speaking louder, “we had no right to them. Maybe they belong to the sea, maybe it’s better if the statues of Erys are lost forever than to be taken by people like us.”

No one spoke, so he dismissed himself. As he went to leave, he stopped and turned back to look at the Finches.

“This is her journal,” he said, voice wavering as he extended the bound book to them. “You should have it.”

“We don’t want it,” Mrs. Finch replied.

Maxwell understood, and apologized again, but he knew that the Finches wanted nothing to do with him anymore. His own parents looked at him with a mixture of disdain and disappointment, though he knew it was because he had failed to bring back the famous lost statue as every Hawthorne had done before him. He scoffed as he left the comfortably heated building for the wintering cold outside. Max walked along the snow covered sidewalks, thoughts of what this had been all for plaguing him every day since he had come back. He did not truly believe in the myth and the statues’ power, but he couldn’t help but think that this had been the Trinity’s retribution. That the gods had not taken kindly to humans searching for them like hounds, uprooting them from their ancient homes, buying and selling them like mere baubles to gawk at and show off.

He did not stop walking until he found himself inside the Museum, his feet bringing him back to the Erysi hall where Claudia had taken him to see the Statue of Eean just months ago. Now stood an empty glass display case, the unadorned pedestal reminding him of both the Temples of Esus and Eean. He felt the urge to laugh at the irony. Or maybe not. Maybe this was how it was meant to be. Maybe everything was just so.

