

i'm afraid i'll go to heaven

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Jedediah and Octavius don't make it out of Pompeii. While the museum mourns, the two have a spiritual journey.

Act One - i don't want to live forever

Chapter One: this is the story of paradise lost

"Ohh. Pompeii."

Screaming.

Running.

And a dead end.

The two men were cornered, lava on all sides. The heat was unlike anything they'd ever felt before, agonizing and cruel.

"Last roundup, Kemosabe. Time to slap on the barbecue sauce, boy." He panicked. Octavius looked at his comrade. To think that only a night or two ago, they had been watching cats chase lasers on the internet. Now, here they were, about to die. Octavius backed up to the wall, as close as he could get. Jedediah did the same. He looked at Octavius, their eyes meeting for a moment. Jedediah could see that, among the growing sweat and melting plastic, tears were streaming down Octavius's face. Jedediah let himself cry as well, as a glob of his own melting hair covered his eye. The stages of death cascaded over the both of them in an instant, shock and denial giving way to acceptance as their bodies continued to collapse.

"Octavius?"

The general coughed ink-black smoke from his lungs as he tried to reply.

"I'll take that hand now."

The two men gripped hands, one of the few parts of themselves that remained solid. Jedediah's clothing was already aflame. Octavius's leg had melted to the point that it had fallen off, reduced to a pile of sludge. "Jedediah!" Octavius managed to cry out over the choking air. "There is something you must know, before we...!" Octavius couldn't bring himself to say 'die'. "Well, spit it out, partner, ain't like we got much time!" Through the melting hair and facial features of the both of them, their eyes managed to meet. Just as their structural integrity collapsed, Octavius managed to cough out,

"I love you."

As their bodies melted back into silicon. Their hands merging into one being, before losing any sense of self at all. A strange lump of red, blue, peach, tan, and gold, a strange island in a sea of lava. From this mass protruded the smoldering feathers of Octavius's helmet, its metal lodged in the plastic flesh. Jedediah's hat had been burnt to ash, the leather of his boots crumpling into white-hot flesh before disintegrating. A single eye peered from the pile, a single dot of black paint, staring upwards to the sky, its tears long evaporated by the heat.

Dexter arrived after the flames died down. Vesuvius couldn't erupt forever. The capuchin searched the diorama as thoroughly as he could, checking inside buildings and temples alike. And then he found them. Their remains were peeled from the faux-stone floor of Pompeii fairly easily. Dexter held what was left of his friends in his hands, not fully understanding why this

strange part of Pompeii filled him with such profound grief. The pile smelled like them in the agonies of death, coughing ash and smoke as the Earth released part of itself to the crust. Dexter, mournfully, climbed his way into the vents again, to return with the horrid sight to the main group.

It was an agonizing event, to see the group come across Dexter, alone in the hallway, with what seemed to be a lump of clay in his hands. "Dexter, what the heck, man? Where's Jed and Octavius?" Larry had kept Octavius's cape in his pocket, which Dexter managed to procure with his quick fingers. He presented the lump in one hand, and laid the red fabric atop it with the other. The little primate couldn't speak, but the message was received.

Attila was the first to break the silence with a sob.

Larry turned away from the group, holding back his tears. He could hear the others in shock, agony, rage, all the emotions that come with sudden death. He bit his lip to bury his emotions. He couldn't give up hope. They were going to fix the tablet. His tooth pierced his lower lip, a small cascade of blood dripping down his chin. *When the tablet's fixed, they'll come back*, he thought. "C'mon. We... we can mourn them when we make sure you'll survive the night." He took their remains from Dexter's paws, and placed them into his front pocket as carefully as he did when they were two beings.

A strange evening in London. Statues coming alive, a play ruined by a madman in armor, and a re-enchanted tablet. The museum would live again, the tablet bathing in the light of Khonsu, letting plastic and wax move like living things. Larry, with hope he knew he shouldn't have had, peeked into his pocket to see if the magic had fixed them. There was only an unceremonious flop forwards as the mass of melted plastic fell with gravity to the front of the pocket.

It hit Larry all at once - they were gone.

His flight back to the United States was silent. Not one of the group had anything to say. Ahkmenrah was left behind, the tablet's magic with him, the others resigned to their fate as exhibits, and...

He carefully removed the remains of the two from his pocket. *How horrible must it have been*, he thought, *to watch yourself melt like that?* At last, he noticed the eye. Whose of the two, he couldn't tell. It stared at him. A single eye was all that remained of their bodies, sunken into the plastic and peering into his soul. Larry at last let the tears fall down, coming to rest on the mangled mass of plastic, dripping down the sides into the palm of his hand. This was once his friends, Jedediah Smith and Gaius Octavius, friends so close their bond rivaled love. And now, they were...

Dexter couldn't understand why he felt sad when he looked at the strange pile in Larry's hand. He couldn't understand why Larry was crying at it. Somewhere in his simian heart, though, he knew that it was something important. He descended from the top of Atilla's hat to rest in Larry's lap. Larry used his other hand to pet Dexter's head, soft as he could, as he finally let the floodgates burst. His voice choked in his throat as he tried to subdue the crying for the other passengers. The occasional sob getting out, making a head turn. He couldn't believe it. He didn't want to believe it. His tears continued to fall, his chest heaving and his stomach aching from holding back a true sob.

Jedediah and Octavius never made it home.

Chapter Two: no longer distance than death

It was hard to come home to such quiet halls. No animals bounding about in the foyers, no conversations in languages across the world, no work songs or military drills echoing down the corridors. Just a hollow, agonizing silence. Larry worked his way towards goodbye. Attila revealed that he spoke English, though very little, when he called Larry his friend. Sacajawea and Teddy shared one last moment together, him leaving a kiss on her hand before making his way over to his own area.

"Guess that's it, huh?"

Larry asked from the desk. He held the mangled mass of plastic in his hand.

"Lawrence, I..."

Teddy swallowed a sob.

"I don't have anything I can say to make this right. We... we lost two brave men tonight. It's going to be hard for us."

Larry used his better judgement to hide his thoughts.

It's going to be hard for me. You're all returning to being exhibits.

"How... how do you think they'd want to be buried?"

Teddy managed to climb back atop his horse.

"I suppose they'd like to be buried the way their culture mandated. For Octavius, a funeral pyre. For Jedediah, burial, most likely."

Larry stared at the eye in the plastic.

"...I don't know what's going to happen tomorrow."

"How exciting."

Teddy raised his sword, his body setting into position.

"Lawrence?"

Larry's gaze turned to his friend.

"Smile, my boy. It's sunrise."

The president's body returned to wax.

And Larry was left alone as the sun rose on a new day. The first day without everything he'd come to love - his family returned to stasis, his son en route to college, and the biggest men he knew laid in his hand, liquefied.

If this was hell, Larry had nothing to fear.

The sound of music vanishing.

Octavius woke up in the back of a car. He did not recognize anything. The driver was behind a tinted partition, the skies dark and rainy, the leather seats smelled freshly cleaned. On the radio a song played, muffled by the partition. "*Voy sin rumbo, siga Ruby Ruby Ruby Soho.*" He couldn't speak. He couldn't move.

Did they make it? Did they...?

He managed to look down at himself. His toga was an opulent purple. He wore no shoes. Where was his armor? His helmet? His...?

His eyes darted around the cabin. Where was Jedediah?

With a harrowing crack, he managed to turn his head.

And there was Jedediah. His blue shirt and vest replaced with ones to match Octavius's hue. His pants matched, but no boots. His hat was nowhere to be found. Octavius summoned his will to crack open his jaws. "Jedediah!" He called out. His voice was burnt and raspy.

"I would recommend resting, if I was you, bub."

The driver spoke, their head turned slightly.

From the radio, "*Es mejor, es mejor decir adiós.*"

"You had a rough time, didn't'cha? I never thought I'd head back to Pompeii. What a fool I was, eh?"

With the aching cracking and breaking of his limb, Octavius managed to open the partition.

"Who... are you?" Octavius rattled.

The driver kept their eyes on the road, but continued to address the Roman.

"I've got a million names. Greeks called me Charon, or Hermes on a good day, Akans call me Amokye, Hindus call me Yama, and a buncha other names that've been lost to time. It's all the same shit, though."

The driver stared at Octavius. He recognized that face.

"I'm Psychopomp. But considerin' your upbringing, you can call me Mercury."

Octavius let his body lean back in the chair.

"My lord, Mercury... tell me, what happened?"

Psychopomp laughed.

"Ain't it obvious, bub? You're DEAD!"

Octavius's heart shattered at the statement. He didn't want it to be true.

"And ya bit it in Pompeii of all places! Fashionably late, aren't'cha!"

Psychopomp continued their full belly laugh.

"Well, you and your yeehaw friend there. It was nasty when I picked y'all up. All congealed together and sticky. Nearly got stuck yankin' your souls out."

Ah. So he did have a soul.

"Now, you two are a strange case. Powers are all sorts'a mad, tryin' to decide where you're gonna go. I'on even know HOW the Egyptians got involved in all that mess, but it ain't my job to get in their business."

The car came to a stop, just as the song did.

"I'm just the ferryman, is all."

The door on Octavius's side opened up. All at once, the stiffness washed off him like a cold shower. He stepped from the back seat, revealing what he'd been driven in.

A hearse, painted an eye-catching yellow, checkerboard patterning across the doors.

On the side, in big black lettering, an advertisement of services was stated.

"PSYCHOPOMP TAXICAB. Any afterlife, any time. Fare varies by religion."

Octavius knew he had no money to pay the fare. His toga had no pockets, and he had no coin purse on his belt. "Um... I'm sure you saw the state I was in, I don't... I don't have the fare." Psychopomp looked back to Octavius, their eyes burning with holy light. "Like I said, you two are a strange case. I should be leaving you on the other side of the river, but..."

The door on the other side opened, and Jedediah unceremoniously flopped out of the cab and onto the road.

"Orders from upstairs say to bring you here right away."

"FUCK!" Jedediah spat as he tried to rise to his feet like a newborn calf. "Hell of a way to wake a man up, Gigantor!"

Octavius made his way around the back of the cab to help Jedediah up.

"Oh, hey, Ocky."

"Jedediah, are you all right?"

"I've been in worse. Where are we, anyway?"

Psychopomp exited the cab, their sandals making no noise on the cobblestone road. The cab itself vanished in a puff of golden light. Jedediah tried to look back at the cab, but his vision locked onto Psychopomp. His heart leaped into his mouth. Octavius could see him shaking. Tears streaked down Jedediah's face.

"Oh, please, no."

Jedediah saw a tall figure. Bony hands held a scythe, dripping with the remnants of souls. A black cloak laid on the figure's frame, hiding all of its features, save its hands and... and its face. A skull. Teeth without gums, sockets without eyes, voice without a voice box.

"Please, mister Reaper, I, I ain't ready, please."

Jedediah begged as he gripped onto Octavius, his hands shaking. Psychopomp snorted, and began to laugh again.

"Relax, big shooter, I've already done my job!"

The two dead men saw a similar sight, but the exact image was different. They both saw Psychopomp extend a hand to Jedediah, and from their fingers grew two white roses. "You both are dead. Sucks, but it's already dealt with." Each rose came undone from its stem, and floated before each of the two men. "Take 'em. Those're your keys." Psychopomp adjusted their accessory. Octavius saw Mercury straighten out his hat. Jedediah saw the Reaper pull down their hood. As the two men took the roses, their fears began to recede.

"I... I'm dead?"

Jedediah looked to Octavius.

"Well, I guess *we're* dead, huh?"

Octavius let out a small chuckle. "I thought it would be more painful."

Jedediah laughed alongside him. "I thought so too."

The two men's laughter gave way to tears. Sobbing with smiles on their faces, laughing through their tears. Death had done its job, yet they remained together.

Psychopomp took a long drag from a cigar. The flame at the end burned an ethereal purple.

"I'll show ya to your paradises, if you're ready."

Chapter Three: the arrow of time

Psychopomp led the two men down the shadowed road. It wasn't a foreboding darkness, or a terrifying darkness; it was a primordial dark. It felt familiar, in a way. The mist that visits people when they sleep, the warm void of the womb. A lack of light all people know, deep down. Psychopomp's cigar lit the darkness, for a time, its purple flame acting as a lantern.

"Either of you gentlemen smoke?" They asked the two men, offering a spare cigar.

Octavius shook his head.

"Well, I used'ta, back during my first life, I think. I don't really remember." Jedediah answered.

Psychopomp took in a drag as the other smokable disappeared into golden mist.

"First life, huh? That's probably why the folks next door are all up in arms. Your souls were already dealt with."

As they continued, Jedediah took a moment to study Psychopomp. Their cloak was long and dark, tattered at the end. He couldn't tell what the material was, exactly. It frayed like denim, but looked much lighter; maybe linen? Every step they took, there was no sound from any of them. Part of Jed wondered, if he were to meet Dante, if he could point out that gravity worked on the living soul. Jedediah also noticed the scythe - it was much bigger than the ones he knew people worked with. This wasn't meant for wheat, this was meant for souls. To sever the soul from the body and drag it, kicking and screaming, into whatever came next.

Octavius was doing the same action as Jedediah - looking over Psychopomp. They looked like Mercury, god of travelers, of thieves, of boundaries, of messages. Quickness and flight. In their left hand, a caduceus; their staff wrapped in twin snakes. Nowadays that symbol was used mostly in medical circles, but Octavius remembered its earlier use - Mercury's staff that could guide dreams and give gentle deaths. Naked and toned, Psychopomp had the ideal Roman physique. A faint golden glow, as if the glory of Rome itself had manifested as divinity. Only a helmet adorned their head, and a pair of winged sandals wrapped around their feet. Octavius couldn't help but wonder how the leather of the car felt on their bare rear end. How he'd like to feel his own skin against leather, with... he put the thought out of his mind. Too late for any of that now.

The trio stopped before a door.

"All right, gentlemen, this is your stop."

Psychopomp stepped out of their way.

"Go on and stick yer keys in whenever you're ready. I gotta pick up some schmucks in the Midwestern US. Thought it would be fun to shoot off fireworks from the top of a jet fuel tower. You'd think the five layers of barb-wire fence and the smell o' gas woulda tipped them off!"

Psychopomp laughed hard as their car drove up to the group from the darkness, its driver side door open. The strange guide of the dead sat themselves down in the seat, and buckled their seatbelt.

"Ain't that redundant at this point?"

Psychopomp snorted again.

"You're funny, Jed. But when you've seen as many dice cup situations as I have, you wear it."

They shut the door and revved the engine.

"Enjoy your stay!"

And with screaming tires, the taxicab of the dead sped off into the void, leaving the two men alone.

"...Dice cup situations?"

"It's what happens when the windshield don't break, Ocky. You rattle around like a ragdoll, or dice in a cup."

"How dreadful."

Jedediah held his rose in his hand. It was pristine white, its petals nearly glowing. "So, it's a key..." He held it up to the door's keyhole, and in an instant, it morphed from a rose to a

key, the thorns merging and shifting to become the teeth; the petals hardening to a rose motif at the head. "Huh. So it is." Jedediah looked back to Octavius. "... I hope it's everything I was lookin' forward to." Octavius smiled, and gave him a short nod. "It's paradise, Jedediah. That's the whole point, right?"

Jedediah nodded, and pushed the key into the keyhole. It turned with a click.

Slowly, the door opened.

Jedediah could smell fresh dew and wild winds.

In the doorway was an open plain that extended farther than he could see. Wild green grasses blew in the wind, some patches longer than others. The sky was a pristine blue without a cloud in the sky. Trees bunched together in coniferous forests, a river or two cutting through the land, mountains in the distance. Jedediah stepped forwards into the doorway. The grass felt soft on his bare feet. The wind blew through his hair, filling his lungs and soul with the scent of adventure.

Jedediah turned back.

"Octavius, it's... it's wonderful!"

Octavius stood outside the door's frame, hesitantly placing his feet on the grass. "This is your idea of paradise, Jedediah?"

"Course it is! Wide, open lands, just achin' to be explored!"

The wind blew from another direction, bringing the smell of salt.

Jedediah stuck a finger in his mouth, and held it up against the air. He pointed in the direction of the colder side.

"That way. Must be an ocean or somethin'!"

Octavius's heart soared, seeing Jedediah in his element.

Then, Jedediah spread his arms out, and fell. Rolling downwards, down the hill. Octavius chased after him for a moment, stopping to watch from the edge. Jed's rolling descent came to a halt when he landed in the river. Up he came from the water, his hair soaked, his clothes dripping with grass stains and water.

"YEE-HAW!"

Octavius watched his ally enjoy his paradise. An entire world ripe to be explored, and by who else but the mountain man Jedediah Strong Smith.

Or, rather, his imitation in miniature.

Octavius was sure that he wasn't exactly Augustus, despite the few memories that danced in his mind. He was not Gaius Octavius, later crowned Caesar Augustus, first emperor of Rome. He was Gaius Octavius, hand-painted miniature in a diorama in New York City. His soul was his own, his life was his own, save for a few straggling memories of who he was meant to represent.

A strange case, indeed.

Act Two - whatever's waiting on the other side

Chapter One: memories live longer than dreams

The sky had changed from its pleasant blue to the deep navy of the night. Stars, more stars than Jedediah had ever seen, twinkled in the inky sky. He could do nothing but stare at them, trying to find constellations he recognized. Flat on his back, arms spread out, blades of grass surrounding his entire being, his gaze enraptured by the sky above. His eyes were so

focused on the stars, he didn't notice Octavius's gaze locked onto him. The two men stayed like this for a while, atop a hill, the night sky above them.

"I thought the planetarium had good stars, but this..."

Jedediah turned his head towards Octavius, his eyes still locked on the sky.

"This is somethin' else."

"You really are."

Jedediah's eyes finally turned away from the stars to meet Octavius's gaze. "What?" Octavius covered his mouth, almost unwillingly. His face flushed with embarrassment as his gaze was suddenly transfixed on the ground. "Nothing," Octavius said, muffled. Jedediah snorted, before laughing as he sat up. A few stray blades of grass stuck to his clothes. "Y'know, you ain't subtle." He looked back to the sky again, looking for red stars. "All that stuff you were on about in England, it... it wasn't hard to connect the dots." The stars began to fall as a meteor shower began. "You asked me to hold your hand, after all. And... and when we were hidin' in Attila's hat, you..." Jedediah brought his knees to his chest. "You held me." Octavius tried to look at Jedediah, but couldn't bring himself to do so. Jedediah took his focus off the stars for a moment, putting his head down onto his knees. His toes curled in the grass, bunching up the terrain beneath his feet.

"I ain't never been held like that."

Jedediah's face felt hot as he admitted that.

"I guess... I guess I..."

Jedediah couldn't bring himself to speak again. His words stumbled out of his mouth as he tried to put them in the right order.

Octavius came closer, hesitantly putting his arms around his midnight cowboy.

Jedediah lifted his head.

Their eyes finally met again.

"I can see the stars so clearly."

Octavius put a hand on Jedediah's cheek as he watched the meteor shower reflected in his eyes.

"So, what'cha said in Pompeii... you meant it, right?"

Octavius nodded. "Every word."

Jedediah leaned closer to him, and gently, ever so gently, pressed his lips against Octavius's.

The two men stayed like that, for a moment. Their lips together, eyes closed, bodies in embrace.

Jedediah was the first to pull away.

"I love you too."

Midnight, the stars, and you.

The sun rose in Jedediah's paradise. Golden beams of light broke over the horizon, through the mountains. The sky's color changed as the stars faded away. The deepest night blue fading away, brightening into shades of pink and gold.

The two men laid in the grass, in one another's arms. Jedediah's head rested on Octavius's chest, his ear pressed where his heart would be. There was no gentle *thump-thump*

of his heart. Would there have been at all, if they were alive, anyway? Or, whatever imitation of 'alive' they embodied. Well, it didn't matter now. Their lives were over.

"Jedediah?"

"Yeah?"

"...I'm glad you're happy here."

Jedediah looked up towards his lover.

"The clear skies, the open lands, the unexplored terrain, it seems to be everything you want."

Jedediah put his hand on Octavius's chest.

"Not everythin'."

The two men met their gazes again.

"I don't... I don't wanna explore this place alone. There's a whole world in here waitin' to be catalogued, to be studied, to be mapped out. But..."

Jedediah rose up to fully rest atop Octavius, sitting on him at the waist.

"I don't wanna explore it without ya."

He leaned down towards Octavius, his hands resting on either side of his head, palms in the grass. Gently, he leaned closer, and their lips met. For a moment, time seemed to stop. Nothing else mattered. Not the rising sun, not the flowing river, not the blowing winds. Just this kiss, shared between two men that never would have met, if not for the magic of Khonsu.

The sun finally rose above the mountains.

"I finally got to experience the sunrise with you."

Octavius stroked Jedediah's scruffy cheek. He never could fully commit to the beard.

The scratchy hair reminded him of the thorns of his key.

"We... we haven't visited my paradise yet, have we?"

Jedediah shook his head.

"Let's go take a look."

Octavius patted his side, looking for a pocket that he must have placed it in. No pockets. He didn't lose his chance for paradise, did he?

"Uh, Ocky?"

Jedediah pointed out the white rose, floating above Octavius's head. Slowly, it descended into his hand, its shape morphing into a key not unlike Jedediah's.

"Well, all we need now is the door."

Octavius moved to get up, but found his hand pressing not against grass and earth, but... wood.

They were laying atop the door.

Jedediah got up from Octavius's waist. "Well, if that's where it manifested, then."

Octavius said with a shrug. He plunged his key into the door, and it fell open.

Taking him with it.

"Octavius!"

Jedediah grasped the sides of the doorway as Octavius fell in. He expected to see him falling into something dangerous, like cobblestone roads, or shining marble, or lava-

Not a king-sized bed.

Octavius had landed in a bedroom, with floors of stone and furniture of wood. A nightstand on either side of the bed, a purple curtain draped around the sides. Jedediah realized

that the door opened through the bed's canopy. Octavius had landed on his back, the bed cushioning his fall. His dark curls bounced as he laughed, his chest rising and falling with each breath. He looked up at his cowboy, his sunny wilderness casting a beam of morning light down into the bedroom; lovers staring through a skylight.

"Come on, Jedediah!" The Roman laughed, his arms extended upwards to catch the cowboy. Jedediah smiled, and leapt in right after him, landing atop his new love. Octavius caught him with both arms, and at least one leg. The bedsheets became undone at his landing, concave for a moment as the two men laughed in their embrace. Octavius took the lead this time, carefully cupping Jedediah's scruffy cheeks for a kiss.

"*Grata domum*, Jedediah."

"What's that mean, Ocky?"

"Welcome home."

And their lips met again.

Chapter Two: not even nostalgia is as good as it used to be

The morning sun glittered through the windows of the bedroom. Specks of dust floated in the light, descending down ever so slowly, like marine snow. One of the beams of light came to rest on the purple curtains on the bed, which kept the two men occupying it hidden from the rest of existence. Octavius and Jedediah laid on their sides, one still covered in dirt and grass stains.

"So, yer paradise is a house?"

"Well, yes. Soldiers were promised a few acres of land, if they served for twenty-five years. I... I always felt that was a better option than what I... or, Augustus, had."

"What did he have?"

"Augustus was the emperor. He had everything. Multiple rooms for servants, elaborate mosaics, a large seating area, direct access to the Temple of Apollo... anything he needed, it was within arm's reach or only an order away."

"Jeez. And you wanna give all that up fer... fer a homestead?"

"I don't need a palace, Jedediah. That much excess, it... it sickens me."

Jedediah placed his leg over Octavius's hip.

"Well, he's long gone now, Ocky. And like you said, that was Augustus. That ain't you."

Octavius blushed a bit at Jedediah's leg pinning him down.

"*Pulvis et umbra sumus*."

Octavius's brow rose.

"We are dust and shadows... Jedediah, you...?"

"What, a man can't read a book sometimes?" Jed snorted. "The look on your face."

Jedediah kissed him on the forehead. "I got a soft spot for old literature, Ocky. Homer, Horace, Chaucer, Dante, anythin' made before the printin' press." Octavius smiled as a blush came to his cheeks. "Guess that's why I drifted to ya." Jed removed his leg from Octavius's hip, and rose to sit up.

"How's about we take a look around?"

Octavius nodded, rising to his feet on the same side as Jedediah. The stone floors felt cool against his bare feet. Jedediah shivered as he stood up. "Yeesh. Chilly." Octavius felt the lightbulb go off in his head. In a swift motion, Jedediah was lifted off his feet, Octavius picking him up into a bridal carry. Jedediah's face matched the shade of a cherry tomato. "Um, Ock?

Uh.” Octavius chuckled at his stammering cowboy. “Finally out of words, Jedediah?” Jed tried to pull down his hat, but without a brim to capture, he ended up burying his face in his hands.

The domus was a simple home; four rooms in total. The bedroom, of course; a kitchen with a stone oven and stocked pantry; a private bath whose water was the ideal temperature; and a main area with a fire pit, skylight, and seating area. All the furniture matched the bed, the same shade of deep purple in the velvet and cotton threads. Jedediah whistled in appreciation as he rummaged through the pantry. “Pretty sweet, Ocky. It’s got everythin’ you need.” He pulled out one of the jars of pickles and popped the lid. “It has been too damn long since I had one o’ these.” He said with a smile as he fished one of the larger pickles from the jar. “I never was a fan of pickles, I think.” Octavius said, testing the softness of the couch. “Were pickles even invented when Augustus was around?” Jed asked as he took a bite.

Octavius was about to answer, but was interrupted by a knocking at the door.

“Oi! Anyone home?!”

The two recognized that particular brash voice.

Under the door, like a shadow, slipped Psychopomp.

“Oh, hey, Sy,” Jedediah said with his mouth full of pickle.

Psychopomp rose a brow. Jedediah saw the Reaper put a hand on its waist.

“Sy, huh?”

Jedediah swallowed. “Ya needed a nickname. Psychopomp is real long.”

Psychopomp shrugged and made their way over to the seating area.

“Hello, Lord Mercury. To what do I owe the honor?” Octavius asked.

“Ain’t you the polite one. Just stoppin’ by to see how you two are gettin’ along.”

They conjured a bottle of beer from golden light, and took a swig.

“Everythin’ to your liking? It’s your paradise, so it should adjust to your wants.”

Octavius took a look around. “Yes, I’d say it’s about what I’d want. The specifics I never got the time to think about.”

Jedediah sat next to Octavius, still working on that pickle.

“Mine’s great! It’s gonna take me ages to explore all of it!”

Psychopomp nodded with a smile as they took another sip.

“Excellent. Now, as I said earlier, you two are a strange case. You got to go straight to your paradise, without goin’ through the motions that everyone else does. Your spiritual ties are so tangled up that Indra’s taking notes for his net.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand,” Octavius stated as he leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees.

Psychopomp chugged the rest of the bottle before it disappeared into mist.

“You ain’t been judged yet.”

A chill ran through the men’s spines.

“Now, the folks next door are negotiatin’ on who gets to judge ya, but that’ll take a while.

So...”

Both men saw a sad look in Psychopomp’s eye.

“Try not to get too attached to this place.”

Jedediah angrily crunched the last bite of his pickle and swallowed.

“How dare you.”

Octavius looked at his lover. That rage he knew Jed was capable of was burning in his eyes.

"Come again?"

"How dare you give us paradise, then threaten to rip it from us. How cruel can the gods be?"

Octavius put a hand on Jedediah's shoulder to try and calm him.

Psychopomp conjured another cigar.

"I ain't say that. I just said 'don't get attached'."

The smoke coming off the cigar's end began to morph and change into new shapes. The men watched as they spoke.

"You two got different gods. Ock, you're meant to be judged when you pay yours truly to take ya across the Styx. Jed, you're meant to be judged by the Christian God. Thing is, both divinities have records of you two already passin' through."

The smoke danced into visuals of what Psychopomp was saying.

"It's like double jeopardy. Ya can't judge the same soul twice."

The smoke changed forms into a pyramid.

"Then Khonsu came by, claimin' that you were his. That really got the group up in arms, an older pantheon waltzing in like they own the place."

As the smoke began to dissipate, Psychopomp's cigar disappeared.

"So now, rather than makin' progress, the groups are fightin' and bitchin' amongst one another."

The two men turned their gaze back to Psychopomp as the smoke vanished.

"That's why I said 'don't get attached'. These paradises are generic. If Khonsu gets his way, your afterlives are gonna change."

Octavius raised a hand.

"How so?"

*And just at that moment
when someone at my side says: "There! He's gone!"
there are other eyes that are watching for her coming;
and other voices ready to take up the glad shout:
"There he comes!"*

And that is—"dying."

Three years in stasis. That's what Attila woke up to. Three years since his last goodbye. Carefully, he moved his fingers, his hands dusty and stiff. "I'm alive..." He muttered to himself, in his own language. Carefully, he stepped from his podium. Was this real? It had to be a dream.

"Attila, my old comrade!"

Ahkmenrah approached the Hun, his eyes watering and arms outstretched.

Attila couldn't help but cry as the god-king embraced him.

"Ahky."

He hugged the pharaoh back, lifting him from his feet into the air.

"Good to see you again, Attila."

Nicholas Daley was behind Ahkmenrah, dressed in the iconic jacket of the night guard. "Nicky." Attila held out an arm. Nick approached to hug the Hun back, only to be lifted up just like Ahkmenrah.

"Jeez, he's strong."

"You'll get used to it, Guardian of Ibiza."

Attila placed the two back on the ground when he'd had his fill of hugs. "How?" Nick pointed out the sign above the entrance. In a big banner that extended over the windows, a statement read:

"GRAND RE-OPENING OF THE TOMB OF AHKMENRAH"

Nick smiled as he faced Attila again. "Looks like our friends over in Britain set up an exchange. They get our taxidermy and the Neanderthals, and we get Ahk back!" He held his arms around the god-king's shoulders, shaking him a little. Ahkmenrah laughed as he was gently shaken. "And I bring experience. My mother and father have been teaching me more about the tablet than I thought possible. I can do far more with it now. You could see our nightly gifts as my beginning stages." Attila's smile disappeared as he thought about what Nick had said.

"Dexy?"

Nick, instinctively, felt for his keys. They were still there. "He's around here somewhere. He was getting a bit out of shape, so he's been in restoration for a month or so. I assume if he's awake, he's still in there..."

His vision was blocked by a certain capuchin using his head as a springboard.

Dexter landed atop Attila's hat. His elbows and knees were covered in bandages, and some patches of his fur were worn down, but he was the same mischievous monkey they all loved. Attila gave him a gentle scritching under his chin.

"Nicholas, my boy!"

Teddy approached on his horse, Sacajawea riding alongside him. "Good to see you, lad!" He extended a hand out to the new guard. Nick shook it. "Ooh, good handshake. Where's Lawrence, might I ask?" Teddy held Sacajawea's hand as she descended from the horse. "Yeah, he took the fall for McPhee, so he's not here anymore, Ted. Sorry." Teddy nodded. "He's well, then?" Nick gave a hug to Sacajawea. "He is, actually. He's a teacher now."

Ahkmenrah clapped his hands together.

"So! We've got everyone here, except the miniatures. I assume they're as shocked as the rest of you to be awake!"

The group collectively felt their stomachs drop.

"Ahk... you remember what happened to them, right?" Nick asked the pharaoh.

Ahkmenrah smiled, and held up a hand.

"Yes, yes, I remember. Fell into the vents. But Dexter was a clever little simian, getting them out before they roasted!"

Dexter let out a sad chitter as he sunk behind Attila's head. Nick's skin crawled. He either didn't remember, or was completely in denial.

"Come along, then, we mustn't waste time! The night is only so long!"

Ahkmenrah made his way to the Hall of Miniatures, his shoes clicking in the halls.

"He's... he's not gonna like this."

Nick followed after him, feeling his pocket for movement. The remains of Jedediah and Octavius rested in his pocket. Neither he nor Larry could bring themselves to throw it out. That eye in the center... it never moved, it never changed, it never did anything. But both guards felt that somehow it was looking at them. Judging them. Asking without words for three long years, *why didn't you save us?*

Nick knew tonight was going to be the hardest of all the nights to follow.

Chapter Three: and nothing comes between the sadness and the scream

The diorama hall was still. Silent. Not one group came alive. The Romans weren't practicing their drills. The railroad wasn't being worked on in Western Expansion. The Mayans weren't building their pyramid. No one moved. The atmosphere was thick with dread. Nick felt a twinge in his heart.

"Why aren't they awake yet?" Ahkmenrah asked Nick as they entered.

"I... I don't know." Nick's words dropped as he spoke. What happened to them?

"Very funny, Jedediah!"

Ahkmenrah shook his head, resting his hands on his knees to peer into the Western Expansion diorama. "I'm honestly more surprised that you and Octavius got everyone to cooperate. Now where are you, Jedediah? We simply must converse, you were telling me of this lovely thing called a 'rodeo,' and you didn't explain the purpose of the clowns." Ahkmenrah reached into the exhibit, attempting to look inside the buildings.

Nick gently grabbed Ahkmenrah's wrist.

"Ahk, that's enough."

The pharaoh snatched his wrist back from the guard.

"Octavius! Your negotiation skills must have helped you in convincing the Mayans to remain still, despite the language barrier! Well done! Now, come on, you simply must tell me more about your pantheon!"

Ahkmenrah tried to reach inside the colosseum, but was stopped again by Nick.

"Ahk."

Ahkmenrah stood to his feet again, and met Nick's gaze; a fire burned in his eyes.

"They have to be here. They have to! I know they're here, I saw them in his pocket, they're here!"

His fists shook, his knuckles tight.

"Where are they?! Where are Jedediah and Octavius?! Tell me!"

Ahkmenrah was shouting now.

"Why would they hide from me?! I'm their friend! I am the king of Egypt! I am a god given form! Why would they hide from me after leaving me for three years?! Tell me!"

Ahkmenrah's face was strewn with tears. His mouth forced into a trembling smile, his brow furrowed in concern and confusion. He didn't dare blink.

"They're here. Why are they being cruel to me, Nick?"

Nick didn't say anything to him. He *couldn't* say anything to him. All he could do was look at the pharaoh.

Ahkmenrah grabbed the new guard by the shoulders.

"Where are they, Nick? They're hiding, I know it. Please."

His fingers shook on Nick's shoulders.

"Please."

Nick carefully brought their remains out of his pocket. Ahkmenrah's hands slipped from Nick's shoulders, coming together as if he were to drink water from his cupped palms. Nick placed the mangled mass of plastic in Ahkmenrah's grasp.

"I'm... I'm sorry, Ahk."

Silence, for a moment.

Ahkmenrah stared at the one eye at the center of the liquefied silicon.

His smile broke.

Nick tried to help as the pharaoh's legs gave out. Ahkmenrah fell to his knees, looming over the remains. His hands shook in time with his breathing. His tears fell on top of the mass.

His cry of anguish echoed through the empty halls, alerting the other exhibits of the truth.

Ahkmenrah remained on the floor for a time, Nick holding him in embrace, screaming and sobbing over the deaths of his friends. His stomach ached as he sobbed, breathing strained and painful. He regretted his comments he'd made about them roasting alive. The repressed memories came back to him all at once, the static of memories fading away to reveal the raw, bleeding truth. He didn't see Dexter hand Larry an injured pair of miniatures. He had handed him this. This... corpse.

Ahkmenrah felt that the eye was judging him.

The memory of a song.

"There we go."

Jedediah finished writing the information he'd found about a flower in a small journal. Psychopomp had given him a camping kit that Octavius likened to a soldier's *sarcina*, due to the sheer amount of stuff in it. He'd set up a tent, a seating area, and a small fire, over which he had been roasting some fish he'd caught in the river with a pole. The kit also had a bedroll, a compass, and his favorite thus far - a journal with a pen. Jedediah genuinely couldn't remember the last time he held a pen and was able to write. He was sure that Jedediah Strong Smith had, during his life; but being a miniature, he most likely never did. Jed had a thirst for adventure, and a deep love for looking at nature. His paradise lived up to the name - endless wilderness to explore and document. A few pages of his journal had already been filled with his studies; one of a fish, the other of the mountain range in the distance. Jedediah swore he'd climb it one day. His focus remained on the flower, for now.

The bloom was unlike any flower he'd ever seen on Earth, in either life. It was a deep red orchid, with a golden center. Its stamens hung heavily, golden and glittering with pollen. It almost shimmered like metal in the sunlight. *Maybe I'll grow some o' these in a garden, if I find more*, he thought as he held the blossom by the stem. Carefully, he severed the stem with a hearty *snap*. Carefully, he gave the plant a few whacks to get rid of the pollen.

As he pressed the orchid into the pages of his journal, he heard something. Something he never thought he'd hear again.

"What in the...?"

Was that... Sarah?

"*Por que... no puedo moverme...*?"

And, and Javier?

"How'd I get out of the museum?"

No.

"*Wǒ zài nǎlǐ?!*"

No.

"Jedediah!"

The residents. The miners. The workers at the railroad.

They were in his head.

Their voices kept getting louder. Hundreds of people, all speaking at once, directly in Jedediah's brain. His senses began to spiral. His ears rang. His balance teetered. All of them asking where they were, what happened to them, why they couldn't move. All at once. Jedediah thought his mind would collapse.

"Stop! Stop! Please!"

Jedediah's pleas were in time with painful wounds along his arms, legs, back, and hands. He pulled his hands away from his face to watch as, in each palm, an eye sprouted from the flesh. The organs blinked before focusing on Jedediah's face. The eyes burned as they came into being.

Jedediah's agony echoed through paradise.

Act Three - i think that me and mine will be alright

Chapter One: i've hummed this tune to all the girls i've known

Octavius pressed the dough in his hands onto the cutting board. Flour dusted the kitchen in several areas. It was his first time making bread, but he'd heard an old adage - if you're angry, knead bread. You can tell when the baker's mad because his rolls are the softest, fluffiest pastries in town. Octavius rolled the dough with both hands, occasionally dusting fresh flour atop and on the sides to keep it from sticking to the board. He sang a song he'd heard from Larry to himself as he worked.

"Jump into that water and see for yourself, take a deep breath and hold it in, hold it in..."

At last, Octavius felt he'd kneaded enough. His arms were sore, that's for sure. Perhaps bakers could teach the army a thing or two about arm workouts. Octavius took a wrong breath, and let out a huge sneeze into the flour, causing it to puff up in a cloud of mist. He took a moment to recover, then laughed to himself. *Oh, if Jedediah could have seen that*, Octavius thought. He knew Jedediah was at home in his paradise, wandering the hills and seeing what the Earth had to offer; but part of him wanted Jedediah with him at home. *Curse my sensibilities*, Octavius scolded himself, *i'm head-over-heels*. Octavius lifted the ball of dough and placed it in a bowl to rest, covering it with a washcloth.

He'd just finished washing his hands of flour when he heard it.

"*Imperator?*"

Octavius looked around. No one was there.

"General Octavius!"

His head felt like it was splitting open.

"What's happened to us, General?!"

So many voices at once.

"*Iuva me, Caesar Augustus!*"

Octavius's eyes began to water from the pain.

"Enough! ENOUGH!" He shouted at no one.

He opened his eyes to blood on the floor.

Eyes.

Eyes on his legs. His feet. His arms. His palms. Eyes. So many eyes, staring at him. Eyes that followed him even as he moved his limbs away from his face. Octavius sobbed as the pain cascaded through his body. They burned as they manifested like boils, bursting from his skin, peeling away layer after layer to come to the light. His head hurt ever more.

His vision went before he realized Psychopomp was helping him up.

"Easy there, big shooter, easy."

Psychopomp's voice could be heard above the pain. Octavius had been carried, carefully, to the couch not far from the kitchen. "Looks like you got it too. Didn't think this'd happen." Octavius still couldn't see, some deep instinct in his being shutting off his vision from the pain. He turned to the guide of the dead's voice in lieu of looking at them. "Lord Mercury, please, help me..." he begged, the eyeball on his windpipe making it hard to speak. Psychopomp leaned over, elbows on their knees, hands folded in front of their face. "Hm. This ain't good at all, bub. I can tell ya that much."

Octavius felt a tap on his shoulder.

The pain began to recede. Gradually, his vision returned to him, fading in like an old photograph. He saw that a wing of Psychopomp's caduceus rested upon his shoulder.

"That help any?"

Octavius sat up, carefully.

"Yes, Lord, thank you."

Octavius was still covered in eyes, each blinking at separate intervals, but at least the pain had faded. "Lord Mercury, please, what's going on? Why..." His hands began to shake. "Why did this happen to me?" Psychopomp shook their head and whirled their caduceus behind their back. "We don't know why. All sorta pantheons are in a twist now because of this. You n' yeehaw both are muckin' things up." Octavius's heart twisted when they said that. "Jedediah is...?" Psychopomp held up their index finger. "One sec."

With their caduceus, they ripped open the floor. Octavius imagined that the whole action would look far more intimidating if he saw Jedediah's Reaper instead of an entirely naked god. The ground glittered with golden light as Jedediah's form was lifted from the earth, covered in an equal amount of eyes. His breath was shuddery and pained. Psychopomp lifted him up onto the couch alongside Octavius. "I tried to help with the pain, but he won't let me touch him." Octavius put his hand atop Jedediah's. The eyes on their palms met.

"Hey."

"Hello."

Octavius joined his hand with Jedediah's.

"You got it too?"

"Indeed. I don't think I'll be able to finish my loaf."

Jedediah snorted.

"And I ain't gonna climb no mountain anytime soon."

The two men laughed together.

Psychopomp watched them, puzzled. For the first time in a long time, they were entirely stumped. Their very beings were in agony, their souls swimming with other souls like a beehive

behind glass. The pain, the agony, the sheer shock of it all; it should be ripping them to pieces. Why are they still here? Why haven't their paradises shattered?

Why are they laughing?

Psychopomp managed to tap Jedediah's knee with the end of their scythe. Jed took a deep breath as the pain receded. "Easy, Jedediah, easy." Octavius tried to cup Jedediah's cheek again, but a cluster of eyes were in the way. Couldn't get too close. "Yeesh, I had to bring you to your boyfriend just to get you to chill out enough to numb. Yer a strange case indeed, Smith."

The two's attention turned back to Psychopomp.

"Mind tellin' us what *this* is all about?"

Jedediah gestured to his entire being.

Psychopomp nodded, bringing their scythe away from Jed's knee.

"You two somehow managed to yank a few hundred souls from the living world. They should be alive right now, but they're buzzing around in your souls instead. That's uh," they gestured at the two with one hand, "why the eyes are here. Windows to the soul, and all." Octavius looked at the eye in his hand. He swore he could recognize the color. "How do we rid ourselves of these eyes?" He asked, before another sharp pain ripped through his head.

"Ocky?!"

Octavius began to groan as Jedediah tried to help him stay up.

"Hell's going on?!"

Psychopomp got to his other side to keep his balance.

With a wail of pain and anguish, a fresh eye emerged on Octavius's forehead. His eyes, his first pair, did not open. The rest all stared at the fresh eye at the center of Octavius's forehead. It was the size of a softball, at least. For a moment, it was quiet.

"Hello? Can anyone hear me?"

Octavius spoke with a voice that was not his.

"Oh, I do hope this is working. Hello? I am Ahkmenrah, Fourth King of the Fourth King, ruler of the land of my fathers, and I am trying to reach Jedediah Smith and Gaius Octavius."

Psychopomp's brow rose.

Now they were well and truly puzzled.

Chapter Two: to the place between the twilight and the dawn

The night guard sat with Ahkmenrah in his room. The king of Egypt wouldn't place the remains of the two miniatures down. It was morbid, but... he felt closer to them when he held them. He also started crying again whenever he tried to give it back to Nick. "So, they've been gone. The whole time they've been..." He said, his voice aching from his wailing. Nick could only nod. "Yeah." Nick gave the Ahkmenrah a pat on the back. "What I don't understand is why the rest of the dioramas aren't moving."

Ahkmenrah furrowed his brow.

"Maybe the tablet didn't recognize them? It has been three years, after all. It's been through so much since England."

Nick raised a brow. "Huh?"

Ahkmenrah rose from his seating area to stand before the tablet.

"Nicholas, do some mathematics, quickly. There are nine squares in this tablet, each one able to be flipped. As long as the center remains static, we are living beings. But the rest..."

Ahkmenrah ran his fingers along the tablet's designs.

"How many combinations can I make with the remaining sixteen faces, plus the center?"

"Uhh... a hundred?"

"One hundred and thirty-six, to be precise. You were beneath."

"Well, I'd still win The Price is Right."

"Oh, I haven't seen that since I was last here. Is it still on?"

"I don't think it'll ever go off-air, Ahk."

Ahkmenrah carefully lifted the golden item from the wall.

"Either way. One hundred thirty-six. My parents have taught me all of them. They were far easier to memorize once I learned the symbols' meanings."

He returned to Nick with the tablet.

"It's working as intended. Nothing about the combination is off." Ahkmenrah sat down again next to Nick. "I don't know why..." He trailed off, tears welling in his eyes again. Nick pondered for a moment. What sort of magic could force the exhibits to stop moving, even though the tablet was back?

His thoughts were interrupted by his ringtone.

"I'm Miss Sugar Pink, liquor, liquor, lips, hit me with your sweet love, steal me with-"

Beep.

"Ugh. Damn spam callers."

Ahkmenrah's eyes sparkled with inspiration. "Nicholas, you are more brilliant than any sunrise on the Nile's bank."

Ahkmenrah began flipping over a few of the tablet's pieces. "Uh, what?" Nick asked as he put his phone away. "Perhaps the miniatures are not active because of something regarding the... lack of Jedediah and Octavius." He held up the tablet as he finished flipping it around. "If we can get in contact with them, maybe we can find out what happened to our other small friends!" Ahkmenrah looked to Nick with a hopeful smile, but his eyes still held grief unprocessed. "Are you capable of doing that?" Nick asked. Ahkmenrah nodded quickly, rising from the floor again. "Of course! I am Pharaoh! If there's anyone who can speak to them, it would be me."

He held the tablet up in the air, as close to the moon as possible.

"Great Khonsu, hear me! I desire a parlay with the dead!"

The light cascaded an ethereal purple. Nick stepped back as otherworldly smoke filled the room.

"I beseech you, let me speak to Jedediah and Octavius! My allies! My friends!"

Spirals of smoke ran up Ahkmenrah's form. The tablet floated on its own, glittering gold in the violet light.

Ahkmenrah's eyes glowed with purple light.

A moment passed. Entirely silent.

"Ahem," Ahkmenrah cleared his throat, "Hello? Can anyone hear me?"

"Ahkmenrah?!"

"Oh, Jedediah! My hunch was correct! Hello, friend!"

"How in the hell are you doin' this?!"

Octavius smiled in a way that Jed recognized as Ahkmenrah's smug regality.

"I am Pharaoh! I am the gateway to the next world, a god given form! Communication with the dead is a trifle."

Psychopomp would have something interesting to talk with the boys about later.

"Where is Octavius? I specifically requested parlay with you both."

"Well, uh, you're using him as a speakerbox."

"Oh. Well, I assume he's still himself?"

Jed watched for any movements. The rest of Octavius was as still as a stone.

"Nope. I think you're overridin' his brain or somethin'."

"Oh, how repugnant," Ahkmenrah said in that tone of voice where you could tell he was absolutely reveling in it.

"So... how are you?"

Back in the museum, Nick had approached the pharaoh. "Uh, guys?"

"Is that Gigantor?! Hey, bud! Been a while!"

Nick laughed. "No, it's not him. It's Nick."

Jed held a hand over his heart. "Oh, lookit'cha, Nick, followin' in your dad's footsteps."

Nick shook his head again, a small smile on his face. "Look, we've got a problem here in the museum." His eyes rolled for a moment. "When do we not, honestly... the dioramas aren't moving. Romans, Westerners, Mayans, no one. Still in the same spot as three years ago."

"Three YEARS?! I've only been here like a day or two!"

"OK, not to reopen the can of worms that is wrestling with my religion, but I think time works differently over there than it does over here. But that doesn't really matter right now. Did you see any of the others there with you?"

"No, I don't think so, but..."

Night guard! It's the night guard!

Oh.

"...but I'm hearin' em."

"Elaborate," Ahkmenrah stated.

"Ock and I started growin' these... these eyeballs. And I'm hearin' voices in my head. Familiar voices. I can hear Javier, and Sarah, and Qiu, and a bunch of folks, all of 'em in my brain at once."

"That must be where they are. They're inside Jedediah and Octavius's bodies."

Psychopomp felt the lightbulb go off. Dioramas. Exhibits. Museums. That's it. *That's why the records are all out of whack. These souls aren't old souls going through again, they thought, they're new ones given to imitations.*

"Any ideas on gettin' em out?"

"I know how." Psychopomp stated.

"And who's that?"

"A friend. Your Majesty," Ahkmenrah's smile of appreciation showed on Octavius's face, "I need to take both of them elsewhere to return the misplaced souls. Can we possibly communicate more later?"

"Well, because you asked so nicely. We shall speak again soon, Jedediah!"

"Ahk, wait—!" Jedediah shouted.

The eye receded back into Octavius's skull. The general regained movement with a pained groan. "Don't EVER let him do that to me again." He spoke, woozy. Jedediah helped him keep his balance. "Breathe, big guy, breathe."

Psychopomp stood to their feet, and approached the door of the domus. Instead of slipping beneath the doorframe, they grabbed the doorknob, turning back to the two men.

"Come with me, you two."

Chapter Three: sadly, the future is no longer what it was

Octavius tried to rise from the couch, but found that he couldn't. The call from Ahkmenrah had caused more eyes to appear, in many unfortunate places - like the joints of his fingers, his inner thighs, and the bottom of his feet. "Psychopomp, I can't walk like this." Octavius spoke as he tried to balance on the edges of his feet. Jedediah cracked his neck and fingers with a mischievous smile. "Time for me to return the favor, then."

"Return the favoOOOOKAY."

Jedediah had picked up Octavius into a bridal carry.

"Feels nice, don't it?"

Octavius couldn't reply with words, but he did nod. His face was flushed, blushing and smiling in a way that made Jedediah want to take this man to bed and just absolutely—

Psychopomp whistled from the door. "C'mon."

Jedediah nodded, following Psychopomp, carrying Octavius out the door. Psychopomp's taxi waited in front of the entrance of Octavius's domus, doors open. "Go on and get in." They said, walking around the hood to get in on the driver's side. Carefully, Jedediah rested Octavius in the back of the cab, giving him room to make sure the eyes on his thighs didn't squish together. Octavius watched as Jedediah closed the door and walked to the other side around the back. Psychopomp revved the engine as Jedediah got in, speeding off the second after he closed the door. Octavius's paradise faded away into the void as the taxi drove.

"So what did you have in mind, Sy?"

"Judgement."

Both men were still.

"You aren't old souls. You just look like old souls, because you were modeled after 'em."

Octavius and Jedediah looked to one another.

"We judge ya, your little buddies there go back."

Psychopomp then closed the partition.

Octavius tried to hold hands with Jedediah again, but the new eyes kept getting in the way. He couldn't lock fingers with him; every joint had an eye, and the palms were covered in them. It seemed as though the amount had doubled.

"Damn it all."

Jedediah turned his head to Octavius.

"Can't even hold your hand. These things have gotta go."

Octavius nodded in agreement.

"I thought this was paradise, Jedediah. This is not my idea of eternal splendor."

Jedediah laughed again. Octavius loved how it sounded like poker chips falling into place.

"So much fer that, huh?"

Octavius moved closer to Jedediah's face.

"At least this part of you is clear."

He placed the softest kiss on his cowboy's lips. Jedediah's face turned a shade of red.

"Well, shucks."

Jedediah leaned in for another.

The two men kissed like this for a long moment, their original eyes closed, their lips locked. It was gentle as the morning breeze, as soft as a song. Nothing else in all of reality mattered. Time, the stars, any worlds mortal and ethereal, none of them compared to one another. The kiss became deeper as Jedediah ran his tongue along Octavius's lips, and the general let him in. Stars swirled in their minds as their tongues touched. Octavius tried to hold Jedediah again.

They each pulled away to breathe.

"God damn." Jedediah panted a bit, catching his breath. "I ain't never been kissed like that."

Octavius gave him one more soft, gentle kiss. "I'd like to kiss you like that again, once this eyeball mess is dealt with."

Jedediah blushed again, his original eyes looking away. "I'd like to do more, if you'll... have me."

Psychopomp knocked on the glass of the partition.

"Put your procreation on pause, pal. We're here."

The doors of the taxi opened. Rather than flopping out like a freshly-birthed foal, Jedediah stepped out with his own two feet. They were parked before a grand pyramid that seemed to be made of gold. Beautiful and ancient, it stood above the men, dwarfing them with its sheer size.

"Is... Is this where I meet Saint Peter?" Jedediah asked. His knees felt like jelly. "I, I wasn't read my last rites, I never repented, I never did nothin'," He began to hyperventilate.

Psychopomp didn't immediately reply as they helped Octavius out of the car. "Just let me do my job." Psychopomp carried Octavius this time. Their grasp was cold, icy as death itself. Octavius shivered in their arms as he was carried up the steps. Jedediah followed, his original eyes focused on Octavius, trying his best to not focus on the large structure. "You doin' OK there, darlin'?" He asked as he caught up to the pair. Octavius nodded. "I'm still alive." Jedediah snorted. "No you ain't!" The two men laughed together once more. Octavius had a way of calming Jedediah down. Psychopomp still couldn't understand how they could find joy in this situation.

Did they not know what was about to happen?

As the doors opened, the group found themselves entering a strange new room. It seemed to be made of stone, the walls covered in hieroglyphs and murals from Egypt. In the center of the room, a giant scale rested. One half held a single feather, the other was empty. Two other figures sat in the room, one with a clipboard in hand. Their body was gargantuan, human from the neck down, and an ibis from the neck up. "Hey, Thoth." Psychopomp said to them as they placed Octavius on his feet. Thoth nodded and wrote something on their clipboard. The other figure laid beneath Thoth's feet, asleep. It had the head of a crocodile and the upper body of a lion, whose paws the reptilian head was resting on. It made Jedediah's skin crawl when he looked at it. Octavius wobbled a bit as he stood on the sides of his feet, leaning on

Jedediah to maintain his balance. "I gotcha, toga boy." Jedediah grunted as he lifted his lover's arm over his shoulders. "Is ol' Devvy giving ya trouble?" Psychopomp stretched their arms up over their head for a moment. "No, The Devourer is as well-behaved as ever." Thoth replied, petting the beast's head for a moment. A low, pleased rumble came from the beast, almost like a purr.

"Sy, why are we here?" Jedediah asked.

Psychopomp turned to face Jedediah.

The two men saw the same being, for once. The body of a human, draped in a loincloth and a shining gold piece of decor over their shoulders. The head of a dog, the long snout above their heads. Their eyes still burned with holy light. Anubis.

"Ocky, are you seein' this?"

"Yep."

It was eerily still, for a moment. Jedediah cleared his throat, and prepared to ask again.

"Sy, wh- ghk!"

He felt a sudden sharp *thunk* in his chest.

Blood dripped down their forearm.

Jedediah stayed still, completely frozen.

For a moment, no one dared to breathe.

Octavius watched as Psychopomp ripped out Jedediah's heart.

Act Four - i don't wanna go to heaven

Chapter One: and as i sat beside you i felt the great sadness that day

It was eerie, how Jedediah's heart beat wildly in Psychopomp's bloodied hand. It didn't beat while locked in his ribcage, secure between lungs and bone, but exposed to the light it beat as though it would never cease. Jedediah's breathing was shuddery and strained, his sternum crushed, his chest concave and open, bleeding onto the pristine stone floor.

He coughed, a splatter of blood splashing out of his mouth and onto the ground.

"What the FUCK is wrong with you?!"

Jedediah's face was red with rage and his own blood. His teeth bared, stained with agonizing red, that same red now beginning to drip from his nostril, eyes filled with tears of rage and pain that streamed down his cheeks nearly as quickly as the blood.

Psychopomp did not answer as they turned towards the scale.

"Don't you fuckin' ignore me!"

The wildly beating heart was placed on the scale.

"Sy, you fuckin—!"

Jedediah stopped mid-sentence. His eyes, original and new, were wide. Octavius kept his focus on him as he stayed entirely still. He didn't breathe, he didn't cry, he didn't blink. He only watched, intensely.

Thoth rose from his seat, clipboard in hand. The Devourer awoke from beneath his feet, and rose to its own. It let out a low, ominous rumbling, like that of a predator. Its eyes were focused on Jedediah, gleaming with ravenous hunger as it prowled around the two men.

"Beginning the judgement of Jedediah Smith. Here, your sins shall be weighed against the feather of Maat. Should you pass this judgement, you shall be gifted your promised eternity.

Should you fail, your soul will be ripped asunder by Ammit, the Devourer of the Dead, as are all the wicked.”

Psychopomp’s gaze turned back to Jedediah.

“Do you understand these terms?”

Jedediah nodded silently.

“Very well.”

Thoth and Psychopomp removed the stills from beneath the scale’s cups. For a moment, the balance was off, as the device adjusted to its new freedom.

Eerily silent, save for the creaking of the old scale.

After what felt like an eternity, it finally came to a rest. Jedediah’s heart remained in its cup, still beating wildly, now equally balanced with the pristine feather. Octavius let out a sigh of relief. Despite all their fighting and harsh words in life, they hadn’t committed any atrocities. Or at least, Jedediah hadn’t. The Devourer’s rumbling ceased, but the ominous stalking of its prey did not.

The heart disappeared from the scale, returning before Jedediah, who took it in his hand. With golden, swirling mists, his ribs rebuilt themselves and his sternum healed, resealing his lungs in the confines of his chest. Jedediah took a breath in with a wince. The eyes began to close, receding back into his skin. Jedediah’s anger melted away as the eyes vanished, his bloody smile stretching across his face.

“Ocky, look! I’m back to normal!”

Octavius smiled alongside him.

Before choking on his own blood.

Psychopomp had approached the two while they were watching Jedediah heal, and had plunged their other hand into Octavius’s ribs. Grasping his heart in their hand, they ripped it out in the same fashion as before. Jedediah supported Octavius again, helping the love of his afterlife remain stable. “I gotcha, baby, I gotcha.” Octavius heaved and coughed, but looked up at Jedediah before locking all of his eyes on the scale.

“Beginning the judgement of Gaius Octavius.”

Psychopomp repeated the same terms to a frozen, wide-eyed Octavius. He accepted the terms silently, as Jedediah did. His heart was placed in the same cup as Jedediah’s was, and set free to balance. Another eerily still moment passed. Octavius felt the eyes of the Devourer burning into his back.

Thankfully, his heart balanced with the feather as well.

When the heart rested in his hand at last, his flinch of pain almost knocked him over as the eyes began to recede. The ones on his feet went last, and he finally regained his ability to stand freely. “Oh, I’m glad we never have to go through that again.” He joked as he got his balance back. Shaking his limbs a bit, he noticed his hand was, at last, free of prying eyes on every joint. Immediately, he used his free hand to clasp Jedediah’s.

“I’ve been meaning to hold your hand for a while now.”

Jedediah laughed that lovely laugh Octavius loved so much.

“Well, there ya go. Eyeballs’re gone, and yer all set.” Psychopomp had returned to their previous form, or forms, if one counted the two perspectives. “I can take ya back to yer paradises now, since we’re done here.”

“Now just one sec, Sy! What the hell was all this about?!” Jedediah demanded.

"I agree, Lord Mercury, why was this done to us?!" Octavius shouted in tandem.

"Easy, easy! It's because of your buddy's magic, is all!" Psychopomp held up their hands. They weren't used to souls being full of righteous anger.

An amused chuckle echoed in the dark.

"It was only a matter of time until I saw you two."

A new being was in the room. He sat opposite Thoth, on the other end of the scale. He kept up the trend of forms, his body human and his head a falcon's. Upon his head rested a golden crescent, which held a silver disc covered in craters.

"And who're you supposed to be?" Jedediah asked with venom in his voice.

Octavius elbowed Jedediah in the ribs.

The figure only smiled.

"The one who's given your plastic forms life for the past fifty-odd years. It was my magic that enchanted that tablet, after all; that makes your souls mine."

He rose from his seat, approaching the pair. His eyes were as dark as the night itself.

"I am the greatest god of the great gods, embracer, pathfinder, healer. I am the one who caused the crescent moon to shine."

He knelt before the men, a hand resting on his knee.

"I am Khonsu."

He extended a hand out to the pair.

"And I would like to make a deal."

Frantically, Ahkmenrah checked the tablet's combination over and over, holding it up to the moon's light. "Come on, come on!!" He strained, trying to re-contact Jedediah. The tablet only glowed for a moment before returning to its normal state. "Why isn't it working?!" He shook the tablet in his hands, vigorously. Tears began to well in his eyes again.

"Ahk, relax!"

Nick held Ahkmenrah around the shoulders.

"Breathe. They'll let us through when they're ready."

"How can you possibly know that?!"

Nick patted the pharaoh on the back. His grief was still fresh, after all, even with the tablet's magic.

But why couldn't they get through to them all of a sudden...?

"Oi! Night-guard!"

Nick turned around to see Javier standing at the entrance to Ahkmenrah's room.

"Mind catching me up on the past few years?"

Chapter Two: when we parted my heart wanted to die

Khonsu had changed his position to sit on the floor, carefully wiping the blood from the two men's faces. "I find you two immensely entertaining. Lovers, in an embrace, only truly understanding after death... oh, it's like a fairy tale." The moon god mock swooned as they dissipated the bloody rag in their hand. "As such, you have earned my favor." Octavius bowed for a moment. Jedediah rubbed the back of his head. "Shucks..." Khonsu pointed to one, then the other. "Oh, decisions..." Psychopomp raised a brow. "What decisions? We've already made 'em." Khonsu rested their chin in one hand. "Which one I want to give my boon."

"Your boon, sir?"

The lunar deity smiled at Octavius.

"With my power, I can send one of you back. But only one."

"Only... only one?"

"Send us back to where, sir?"

Khonsu held out his hand. Within, a small crescent moon formed, its light forming into a window. Through it they could see a familiar sight - the front area of their museum. Remy wasn't in their usual place, so it was likely night-time.

"Life, of course."

It felt as though an icicle had been driven through the two men's chests. The offer of a lifetime, a return to living. The two men met eyes again, and held hands. Their expressions matched, faces contorted in fear.

"Why?"

Octavius was the first to break the silence.

"Pardon?"

"Why only one of us? Why can't we both go?"

Khonsu shook his head. "Your death is on the record now. The dead cannot return to life, for it would compromise human existence to confirm an afterlife. But look," the window changed again, "there is only one body."

The two men cringed as they were shown their remains. Mangled, melted plastic. They could almost smell the ash and smoke from Pompeii again.

"Two souls from one corpse... the numbers are off. We can't have that, can we?"

The window receded, the crescent moon waxing away to nothing.

"Your heart is what connects you to the mortal world. It acted as the bridge for all those souls to get lost in your bodies." Khonsu explained, swirling the stray moonbeams in his hand. "If one is destroyed, and your ties to the mortal world are severed, the other may return."

Neither of the two men wanted to make that decision.

Their eyes met, both welling with tears. Octavius sobbed as he held his arms out to Jedediah. The two men held each other close, hearts in their hands.

"I think... I think it should be you, Jedediah."

Jedediah shook his head.

"No."

Octavius rested his head into the crook of his lover's neck.

"You're an exhibit of American history. You're needed there, more than I am."

"But I need you there with me."

Jedediah sobbed in Octavius's embrace.

"I, I don't, I don't wanna go."

Octavius wept alongside him.

"I know. I don't want you to leave."

Jedediah dug his fingers into Octavius's back.

"Don't make me go. Please. Please don't make me go."

Octavius held his heart in his hand.

"Jedediah. I... I'm sorry I didn't tell you I loved you sooner."

His fingers tightened around the organ.

"I'll wait as long as I need to for you."

Jedediah noticed the lack of an arm wrapped around him.

"Octavius, no-!!"

Octavius's heart was crushed in an instant by his own hand.

Jedediah's face shattered like glass, his pieces falling away into mist.

Octavius wailed as his reflection in Jedediah's eyes drifted away. "*Ignosce me, carissime, ignosce me*," He begged, cupping Jedediah's cheeks in his bloodied hands. He held him and wept as he faded, convinced this would be the last time he'd ever feel his hands on Jedediah's skin. "*Me paenitet, me paenitet, me paenitet...*" He repeated between sobs as he fell to his knees.

I told you once, that only two things will have me - you, and death.

Ahkmenrah gripped the mound of melted plastic in his hand, the metal of Octavius's armor still jutting out, now covered in a fine layer of rust. Time had taken its toll on everyone. "Come on, you two, just give me something. Something that lets me speak to you again. Something."

The remains shuddered in Ahkmenrah's grasp.

"Yeep!" The pharaoh squealed as he dropped it to the ground.

The mass continued to shake, almost violently. "What madness is this...?"

From the corpse burst a hand that gripped towards the sky. A second. Lifting himself from the years-old plastic, a naked Jedediah, coughing as he took in his first breath. The mass cracked and chipped as he emerged from what was his corpse. It had begun to shrink in size as well, the plastic molding itself into Jedediah's new form. His hair no longer blonde and his hat missing, but his eyes still that fateful blue.

"Jedediah! Oh, by the gods..."

Ahkmenrah picked up the coughing miniature.

"Uuggghh... Ahkmenrah...?"

Jedediah's speech was slow and strained. His newly formed vocal chords were just getting used to being used. Ahkmenrah's vision was obscured by tears as he nodded. "It's me, Jedediah, it's me," he sobbed, lifting the miniature to his chest.

Denial, unravelling.

Nick had returned Jedediah to his diorama, giving the shuddering cowboy a piece of fabric from the restoration area to cover himself with. "You can talk to us when you're ready, OK, big guy?" He spoke softly to Jedediah, who solemnly nodded. The others in the diorama helped him to his tent, where they thought it best to give him some privacy. They could barely remember what happened when they were in his soul, but what they did remember, they wished they could forget.

Wrapped in the fabric scrap, Jedediah's eyes were glazed over. He was alive again. His heart beat, his lungs drew breath, his blood pumped through his veins. A second chance, the thing no being should be given in regards to death.

He was alive.

Without Octavius.

Pulling his knees to his chest, and laying his head upon them, he sobbed; his tears falling onto his bare skin. His heart ached in his chest, compressed with his agonizingly short breaths, the twitching of his abdominals as he heaved. He didn't know whether or not he was going to vomit. He'd take the eyes again over this pain. He'd take Pompeii again. He'd take the hourglass. He'd take anything over this, anything at all.

This must be my true judgement, the cowboy thought, *this is Hell*.

The way ahead felt lonely.

Chapter Three: tonight is the last night of the world

The domus was silent. Light cascaded in through the windows, slow and sickly yellow. The loaf of bread had been left to rot, never baked, fostering a colony of mold and yeast beneath the washcloth. Octavius laid on his side in his room, curled beneath the sheets, the ache of time crushing his broken heart. If he focused, he could still smell Jedediah on the sheets. He'd wanted to take Jedediah as his own in this bed, to defy Rome by submitting and being submitted to, to spend the evening with him, sweaty and intimate and alone.

That moment would never come to pass, now.

This was his eternity.

Everything he'd ever wanted - a simple life, a simple home, a few acres of his own rather than the entirety of Rome. It felt empty now.

Without Jedediah to share it all with, it meant nothing.

It may as well be dust.

He may as well be dust.

Tears silently dripped from his eyes as Octavius prepared for infinity.

This must be my true judgement, the general thought, *this is Tartarus*.

He hadn't noticed the guide of the dead enter his home. Conjuring a cigar, they lit it and took a long, solemn drag.

Psychopomp released the smoke from their mouth with a rattling sigh.

"Y'know... I can send you back too."

Octavius slowly turned to them, acknowledging their presence.

"I don't give a fuck about any of these people. Khonsu, Jupiter, fuckin' Capital G, none of 'em. They don't give a fuck what I think either, I'm just the guy who drives the ferry. They rely on y'all to believe in 'em."

They took another drag.

"It's not my job to obey any of those pantheons. It's my job to ferry the dead to what's next. Gods die too, of course, when there's no one left to believe in 'em. Stars know I've shipped off a few in my time."

Octavius did not respond.

"I think they're scared of me. When the last living thing dies, so will the last god, and I'll make my last ride. Then I'll trade in the old girl and go get into macrame or somethin', and everything they've ever done will cease to matter. Even gods run outta time."

They breathed the purple smoke into their hand. It began to swim around, solidifying into a pocket watch.

"Speaking of time, I can give you twenty-four hours."

They placed the watch on Octavius's nightstand.

"You n' yeehaw got the one thing that can overpower any of the old laws these deities put into place - love. That's the thing that can undo curses, reverse prophecy even. So, because you n' him are so good at that old magic, I wanna put it to the test."

They extinguished the cigar in a puff of golden mist.

"Twenty-four hours to say what you need to say, prove what you gotta prove, and do what you need to do. With one condition."

Octavius picked up the hand-sized clock. It was made of silver, and glittered in the sun.

"If you can find somethin' that makes you happier than paradise, you can stay. If you can prove that a finite life would be better than eternal splendor, I will return your soul to the mortal realm."

Octavius ran his fingers over the watch's design, processing Psychopomp's offer. He chuckled a bit.

"None of what you've said sounds right."

The two looked at one another.

"You're offering to send me back to life, to find something that makes me happier than eternal happiness; and we both know who's down there. It's been explicitly stated that I'm meant to be here, and you're actively going against a mandate from a god. You're setting me up to win, Psychopomp, and surely you'll incur consequences for defying the gods."

Psychopomp smiled.

"You wanna see your boyfriend again or not? And don't call me Shirley."

Octavius looked at the watch again, and nodded, letting out a small laugh at Psychopomp's joke.

"Of course I do."

Psychopomp nodded.

"It's not like you won't see me again, Octavius. Even your buddy with the tablet won't escape my grasp. Though that does explain how I haven't filled out my Ancient Egyptian table yet. Ain't gotten his soul yet."

"I'd rather not think about the day the tablet truly loses its magic, we've already dealt with a situation like that."

Psychopomp chuckled as they extended a hand.

"We got a deal, then?"

Octavius shook the guide's hand.

"Yes."

The silver pocket watch glittered with golden light.

"See ya in a while, then, bub!"

And darkness yet again.

A glimpse of hope in trying times.

Octavius awoke in Rome. His arm holding a sword aloft, his stance wide, as though commanding his legions. His armor was no longer silver, but instead a glittering gold. The darkness of the night had reached the stroke of twelve, exactly midnight. Octavius noticed his

citizens meandering about quietly, as if in mourning. *Of course they would be in mourning,* Octavius thought, *I've been dead and they've just woken up to find out about it.*

Two of the soldiers took notice of the General, standing proud over the training grounds.

"Imperator Octavius?"

Octavius waved to the men.

"Ah, Septimius, Trajan! Do be a kind soul and help me down from here!"

Septimius approached with tears in his eyes to help his general down from the platform, Trajan following behind.

"We thought you dead, Imperator! Taken from us across the Styx!"

Octavius rested a heel in Trajan's hand, propelling himself down.

"I thought that as well, lad!"

As Octavius acquired his balance, Septimius hugged his general tight. He'd take whatever punishment was required, he was just happy to have his leader back. Octavius ruffled the soldier's black curls as he was embraced. "Easy, Septimius, I'm not going anywhere." Trajan embraced him as well, trapping Octavius between two young recruits in the center of his diorama. Trajan released him as quickly as he'd grabbed him.

"You're so cold, Imperator, are you well?"

Octavius was swiftly reminded of the deal.

Twenty-four hours to do what needs to be done.

"Yes, I am well. I cannot explain my return just yet, but I will. Right now, I need to get to Jedediah."

The two soldiers looked at each other.

"He's been a wreck since he got back." Septimius said.

Octavius furrowed his brow.

"Take me to him."

In the West, the work on the railroad continued. Javier had taken up leadership in Jedediah's absence. The workers came to a mutual agreement - he needs some time to adjust. They were aware of what had happened, of their deaths, but not of what truly tormented Jedediah's heart.

He sat beneath a small tree, staring out into the painted distance of his diorama. The desert extending forever in two dimensions. Jedediah strummed the strings of his guitar. He'd managed to make one in his spare time before England, but he was still a bit rusty. After a few discordant twangs, he found his rhythm.

He began with a G chord.

"Oh, where, oh, where can my baby be?"

C.

"The Lord took him away from me."

G.

"He's gone to heaven, so I've got to be good,"

C.

"...so I can see my baby when I leave this world."

He ended with a D chord, followed by two G's.

Good to know my singin' voice ain't leave me, Jedediah thought as he changed his hand's position.

Time for a different tune. He didn't notice the string of gasps and murmurs as a certain Roman made his way across the worksite to Jedediah.

His fingers moved quickly now, a string of notes coming out. They cascaded over the barren desert of his diorama, barely audible over the working crowd. At last, he began to sing with the strike of the D chord.

"Di- di- di- did you see the frightened ones; di- di- di- did you hear the falling bombs..."
A breath.

"Di- di- di- did you ever wonder why we had to run for shelter when the..."

He could never remember the next part.

"When the promise of a brave new world unfurled beneath a clear blue sky?"

Jedediah looked up to see who finished his song. He knew that voice.

"Octavius."

"Hello, love."

Jedediah's eyes filled with fresh tears as he rose from the ground. Hesitantly, he approached Octavius.

"You... you're real? I'm not crazy?"

Carefully, Jedediah rested his gloved hand on Octavius's cheek, just as it was done to him many times before. Octavius cupped Jedediah's cheek in return, feeling for his scruff, but finding none.

"I like what you've done with your hair."

Jedediah laughed a bit as his tears began to streak down his face. Octavius's eyes were wet with his own tears as he laughed with him.

"I like your new armor."

The two men smiled for a moment.

"Can I... can I kiss you?" Jedediah asked.

"Of course." Octavius came closer.

The two men's lips met once more as their eyes closed. Octavius ran his hand through Jedediah's red locks, the other holding him close round the ribcage. Jedediah's arms wrapped around Octavius's shoulders, holding him close, as if his soul would escape again.

They cared not who saw, even as eyes began to lock onto them.

Jedediah pulled away after a moment.

"Your lips are so cold, Ocky... are you feelin' okay?"

Octavius wiped the tears from his lover's eyes.

"Jedediah, there's something I have to tell you."

Chapter Four: and at dawn armed with glowing patience, we will enter the cities of glory

Jedediah was silent for a long moment. They had returned to his tent for Octavius to explain the situation in detail.

"So... you have a day to find something that makes you happier than what was over there."

Octavius nodded, his hand clasping Jedediah's. Both men sat on Jedediah's bed, legs over the edge.

"We gotta find somethin' that fits that criteria, and quick. Thing is, up there you had everythin' you ever wanted!"

Jedediah began to raise his voice.

"You had your home, your land, your peace n' quiet, you had the life you dreamed of!"

Jedediah rose from his bed to pace around his tent.

"What possible thing on this mortal plane could bring you more happiness than all of that?!"

Octavius said nothing.

"What could possibly make you happier than that?"

"You."

Jedediah was silent again. A blush came to his face.

"What...?"

Octavius took Jedediah's gloved hands in his own. Gently, he rested his forehead against his lover's knuckles.

"It's you, Jedediah."

Octavius rose to meet Jedediah's gaze, his face red with blush.

"What we did when we were dead... I loved it all. Holding you, kissing you, existing near you. All of those made my afterlife worth living."

Octavius kissed Jedediah on his right index knuckle.

"I sent you back here because I wanted you to have a second chance. Out of the two of us, you deserve it the most."

"Octavius..."

"You're an excellent leader, you have a community that depends on you, and your work ethic ensures that your people will prosper."

He held a hand over his still heart.

"I am a general, a cog in the machine of Rome. I am no emperor, though I share the memories of one. I am not Caesar, I am replaceable. You, though..."

Jedediah removed his hat and let it hang on a hook that dangled from the roof of the tent.

"You are a beacon. One-in-a-million. I am one-of-a-million. If anyone deserved that second chance, it's you."

Octavius's now empty hands rested, joined, at his front, his eyes gazing down at the floor.

"You really meant what you said in Pompeii, didn't you?"

Octavius nodded.

Jedediah's now ungloved hands cupped Octavius's cheeks. Lifting his gaze to meet his own.

"I meant what I said in my paradise too."

He met Octavius's cold lips once more, if only for a moment.

"Let's make tonight special."

Jedediah said with a mischievous smile.

Octavius rose a brow, but when he saw Jedediah start to undo his bandana and shirt's buttons, he got the message. With a small laugh, he undid his helmet's strap, releasing his brown curls for what felt like the first time in years. Jedediah let his vest and shirt fall to the floor

at the same time Octavius managed to unclasp his breastplate. It landed on the tarped floor with a *thunk*. Jedediah kicked off his boots and let them rest off to the side. Octavius slipped his arm guards off his wrists and began to untie his tunic. Jedediah's belt came undone rather quickly, and his jeans were removed. As Octavius slipped off his tunic, Jedediah realized that the man he loved was going commando.

"Huh. Carpet matches the drapes."

Octavius raised a brow. "What?"

Jedediah slipped off his undergarments as he began to explain. "I just expected you to be shaven, is all. You never grew a beard, as far as I could tell."

Octavius chuckled as he untied his sandals and cast them to the side. "From the neck down, I like to be a bit more natural."

At last, the two men stood before each other, entirely exposed. For a moment, they admired each other's bodies, Octavius taking note of Jedediah's softer frame. He had the beginnings of a pot-belly, and his thighs looked so soft. Jedediah admired Octavius's build, his muscles toned and trained by a military regiment that spanned decades. Neither man cared to shave much, their chests and underarms intact, each with a trail of hair that tracked from their navel to their groin.

Slowly, they closed the distance between each other.

"Jedediah..."

"Yeah?"

"...You... you look like..." Octavius found himself out of words to say.

Jedediah gently cupped Octavius's cold face in his hands.

"You look like an angel." He said to his tongue-tied general. Octavius nodded in agreement.

"Kiss me, kemosabe."

The two men locked lips again, forgoing the wait for tongue. Octavius moaned as he tasted Jedediah, and let the two fall onto the bed, Jedediah atop him.

They stayed like this for a time, their hands moving where they may.

Eventually, Jedediah reached for a bottle he kept on his nightstand. Popping the cork, he poured a bit of the contents on his fingers. It was a clear, sticky fluid, from what Octavius could see.

"You mind if I top for the first round?"

Octavius smiled and laid flat on his back, exposing himself for Jedediah.

"I'd prefer it, in fact."

Their lips stayed locked as Jedediah prepped Octavius for a time, two fingers massaging his prostate in sync with their tongues swirling around one another.

They pulled apart as Jedediah pulled out.

"There we go. All set for me."

He changed his position to rest between Octavius's legs. Gently, he pressed the head of his cock against his lover's hole. The skin was cold against the sensitive nerves.

"May I?"

"*Quaeso*," Octavius nodded, "yes."

Jedediah kissed his lover's neck as he pushed in, carefully. Octavius shivered as he did. He'd never felt this before, and at that moment he decided he wanted to feel this way over and

over again. Jedediah released Octavius's neck from his lips, and looked him in the face as he began to thrust.

For a brief time, they were once again the same being.

"Fuck, Ocky, you're, ah, so good..."

"Jedediah, a-, ah, *durior, quaeso*, ahh...!!"

Jedediah's movement remained steady, but he moved with more force, ramming his entire length into his lover, down to the base.

Octavius shivered as he came, embracing Jedediah. His cold body covered in a fine layer of sweat, Jedediah smiled as he watched Octavius cum. His eyes closed, his brow furrowed, his voice moaning as his back arched.

"Fuck, you're so cute when you cum, Octavius."

Jedediah kissed Octavius on the cheek as he continued his work. He felt a particular throb, and used a hand to stroke Octavius's face with only his thumb.

"Do you want me to finish inside?"

"*Ita*, Jedediah, yes!!"

The two men kissed once more as Jedediah finally climaxed. He moaned, breathing hard as he did. His mind swirled with stars as he came inside Octavius, the coldness of his body adding to the pleasure Jedediah felt. For a long moment, the two men remained like this, as one being. They became two again when Jedediah pulled out.

Lovingly, the two men embraced, one catching his breath, the other yet to breathe at all.

"Time is ten til sunrise! Places, people, places!"

Nick called down the hallways, making sure everyone knew to get back to their areas. Jedediah and Octavius remained in bed, embracing one another. They had gone for at least two more rounds, and they were thoroughly spent.

"It's time to get back to our places, love." He whispered to his cowboy.

"Can't we rest, just for a day?"

Octavius let out a gentle laugh as he released Jedediah from his embrace.

"I'm afraid we can't, *carissime*. We have our duty."

Jedediah let out a mock sigh. "Fine. I'll turn back into plastic, I guess."

He fished around on the floor for his underwear.

"Can we... can we do this again soon?"

Octavius turned to Jedediah as he asked the question, slipping his tunic on over his head.

"Jedediah, we're together now. We can make love whenever we wish."

The cowboy blushed as he finally found his underwear.

"Cuz I wanna do that with you all the time."

Octavius strapped his breastplate back on, followed by his sandals.

"And we will. Meet me at my domus, tomorrow night."

Jedediah buttoned his shirt and nodded.

"I must make my way back to Rome, *carissime*. I will see you at dusk?"

Jedediah pulled up his jeans, zipping the fly.

"It's a date."

With one last kiss, Octavius exited the tent, strapping on his helmet.

Back in Rome, the soldiers broke formation as their general attempted to assume his regular position. He was hounded with a thousand questions, most of them questioning how he could be alive at all, and the rest about where he got that shining golden armor. He only laughed and said, "I shall explain tomorrow evening, please, it's only five until sunrise." As he stood atop his podium, he unsheathed his gladius, pointing its blade towards the sky. The soldiers followed suit, in perfect rows. A well-oiled machine.

The sun broke over the horizon.

Octavius watched his legion return to plastic, and braced himself to change...

...but it never happened.

"What on Earth...?"

Nick was making his rounds through the museum, making sure everyone had returned to their places. He'd only had to adjust one of the Huns' arms a bit so far. As he walked through the hall of miniatures, he heard a voice.

"Nicholas! I still seem to be active!"

Nick peered into the Roman diorama to see Octavius waving at him from his podium.

"Octavius?!"

Chapter Five: a longing to be absorbed for a while into a different and beautiful world

Larry was weeping like a baby as he held Octavius against his cheek. Most of what he said was gibberish, but the few phrases that got out were of immense relief, saying things like, "I thought I'd lost you," "I thought I'd never see you again," "I missed you so much." Nick hung up his coat on a hook by the door, kicking off his shoes in the entryway.

"How is this even possible? First Jed comes back, then you show up out of nowhere," Nick asked with a yawn.

Octavius's eyes looked to the floor as he was held against Larry's growing stubble.

"I'll explain everything to you and the exhibits tonight. I'd rather just say it once."

Nick was too tired from a night's work to really object. With another yawn and a nod, he shuffled off to bed. Larry took a breath and let Octavius down onto the counter.

"I'd ask how this all happened, but you said you'd explain tonight."

Octavius nodded.

"In the meantime, Larry, please - catch me up on how life has been."

Larry turned towards the coffee maker, and poured some into a mug.

"Sure. Let's talk in the living room," he said as he held a hand out for Octavius to hop onto.

Octavius saw the beautiful morning sun for the second time. His body felt as though it should be crumbling to dust, but it wasn't. Instead, he only felt the cold hands of Death running along his bones.

"Could you... could you see us?"

Larry took a sip from his coffee.

"What?"

"Nick and I... we couldn't... we couldn't throw you and Jed out. We kept what was left of you while you were gone. I guess Jed's made up of it now. But when we had it..."

Larry swirled his coffee in the mug.

"...there was an eye. Just one. We couldn't tell whose it was."

Octavius shivered as he remembered all the eyeball-based troubles he went through while dead.

"So... could you see us?"

Octavius shook his head. "No, I'm afraid not. The only glimpse we got of the mortal world was when I sent Jedediah back."

"You sent him back?"

"We..." he remembered the words of Khonsu. "...we made a deal."

The main group had gathered together in the entrance hall. After the obligatory crying at their friend's miraculous return from the dead, they had gathered to hear what he had to say. Octavius sat on a matchbox on the desk, hands clasped together.

"I assume you're all wondering how I got back."

A murmur ran through the group.

"I made a deal with... with Death, I suppose."

Jedediah knew who he was referring to. The rest pictured their idea of Death.

"I was given twenty-four hours to find something that would make me as happy as heaven itself."

The time read 11:59.

"I am pleased to say that I have found it. If Death upholds their end of the deal, I will return to life with you all."

Octavius rose from his seat.

"If not, I would like to extend my thanks for a good life, and my hope to see you again."

Jedediah tried to approach Octavius for a hug. He noticed the sickly pallor of his lover's skin. He looked almost grey in this light. Octavius reached his arms out to Jedediah, who held him close. Jedediah's warm skin felt nice in Octavius's cold touch.

"Are you two...?" Larry asked, trailing off.

"Lovie." Attila said with a smile.

"Oh, they have never been subtle about it. Honestly, I was just waiting for them to swallow their pride." Ahkmenrah gossiped into Nick's ear.

"I know, I've been waiting for them to get together since I was a kid," Nick gossiped back.

The clock's hands met at 12.

A sudden wind blew through the halls, chilling everyone to their bones.

Someone new was there.

A person, dressed in black. Their shoes were white and fit for running. Their jeans were covered in patches, each with a different message. "Memento mori." "Protect trans kids."

"Punk's not ded," purposely misspelled. The jeans seemed more patch than denim. Their hoodie was cotton and covered in an equal amount of patches. One patch caught the attention of the group more than others - the patch atop the hood. It read differently to each person in the room.

To Nick, Jed, and most of the exhibits, it read "REAPER" in big red letters.

Ahkmenrah saw "ANUBIS".

Attila saw "TENGRI" emblazoned atop a red sword, the sword that prophesied that he was to rule the world.

Dexter saw a set of sharp teeth, as though some bloody predator was clasping the patch with their fangs.

In their gloved hands was a silver baseball bat. Not a single inch of skin could be seen on the figure's entire body, as though a single sight would identify them. The figure's face was covered by a red bandana, their eyes shrouded by their hood, yet every member of the museum family could see the holy light that burned in them. The figure twirled their bat as they hummed a song Octavius recognized.

"Destination unknown, Ruby Ruby Ruby Ruby Soho."

Octavius looked once more to his family, and with a nod, he stepped forward.

"Hello, Psychopomp."

"Finally dropped the 'Lord Mercury' business, huh?"

Psychopomp set the business end of their bat on the ground with a hollow, ominous *ting*. It rang through the halls of the museum, sharp and cold like an icicle.

"So, Octavius. Present your Arcadia."

Chapter Six: stay light, there is a rainbow coming

There was silence in the halls that night. Octavius kept his gaze on the guide of the dead, despite the aching dread in the pit of his stomach. Jedediah stayed by his side, even though his legs were telling him to run. The others had backed up, the presence of a stranger in their midst. Nick wielded his flashlight in one hand, just as Larry had taught him.

"C'mon, bub, I don't have all night." Psychopomp stated.

Octavius nodded and stepped forward again.

"Great guide of the dead, leader of dreams and spirits, I present my finite joy that outdoes heaven itself."

Octavius bowed, down to one knee.

"He has been given the name Jedediah Smith, and he is my Arcadia."

Jedediah's cheeks turned a shade of red.

"Within this single day on Earth, he has brought me joy that paradise could not compare to. He has loved me, he has held me, he has let me stay in his arms."

Nick and Ahkmenrah met eyes for a moment, each with a knowing look. *Oh, they're definitely fucking*, they each thought.

"If I must turn my back to eternal splendor, I will. If I must face such powers as an enemy, I will. If I must doom my being for eternity, I will. But you will not take me from my Arcadia."

He held Jedediah's hands in his own.

"Heaven cannot compare to my life with him. He is the object of my desire. He is the reason for my being."

Jedediah's blushing face was hidden beneath his hat, but that smile couldn't be hidden even behind a layer of lead.

Psychopomp didn't say anything, but those burning eyes showed a smile.

"That works for me."

Whirling their bat, they rested its end before Octavius.

"By the power vested in me, by the machinations of reality, I return you to life."

Octavius took his first breath. Tears streamed down his face as he did. A newborn cries to begin breathing.

"And fuck what the folks next door gotta say about it."

A thunderclap echoed outside. Psychopomp laughed, extending their arms out as though crucified, bat still in hand.

"It's a new day, folks! And I've managed to piss off every god we've got!"

Through the skylight, in a rain of shattered glass, their taxi crashed into the main room.

"I'm gonna have so much explaining to do when I get back. Listen up, all of 'yall!"

They pointed to the group with their bat.

"You won't escape dyin', even with that tablet. You'll see me again. Some sooner than others," they winked at Nick and Larry, "and I'll remember ya. Just tell me, 'I was there at Arcadia,' and I'll handle the rest."

Sitting in the driver's seat, they buckled their belt and threw their bat into the backseat.

"Later!"

They slammed the door of their taxi, and drove straight into the sky, back through the broken glass. Their triumphant laughter echoed into the night as the shattered pieces rose to repair themselves.

The Daley family no longer feared death.

Octavius and Jedediah laid flat on their backs in the grass of the old Africa exhibit. The area had been closed off while the workers were renovating. The air had a thin layer of dust throughout.

"Apparently, they're makin' this place into a botanical area. Helpin' folks learn all about the flora and fauna of New York."

"Yes, like the humble pigeon." Octavius chuckled.

"I need to study somethin', don't I? Might as well be the local area."

Jed laughed as he reached into his vest for his journal. It took him a moment to realize that-

"This is the journal Sy gave me."

Octavius sat up. "You kept it?"

Jedediah sat up as well. "I didn't think I'd see it again."

He flipped through the pages. His drawings were still there, but the language was scrambled. Indecipherable. A script not meant to be read by human eyes.

As he turned a certain page, the strange orchid fell out of the journal, dried and preserved.

"Oh, this thing!"

He held up the wrinkled flower, its golden center still glittering.

"I saw it and thought of you, so I tried to document it."

He said, looking at Octavius, who smiled sheepishly and blushed at the mention of being thought of.

"It needs a name, y'know. Ain't no orchid like it."

"What did you have in mind?"

"Well, I dunno where it'd fall tax-o-nom-ic-a-lly," Jedediah over-pronounced the word, "but I want its species to be somethin' about you."

Octavius kissed Jedediah on his cheek. His skin felt warm and soft against his lips.

"How about *jededoctavae*?" Octavius suggested, putting his arm around Jedediah's shoulders. "Something for the both of us."

It was Jedediah's turn to blush.

"Yeah. I can live with that."

Jedediah kept flipping through the pages of his journal. Nothing he'd written while dead was legible. With a sigh, he flipped one last page. He'd doodled a cloud he saw while in his paradise.

Written next to his drawing was a message, in messy but readable letters.

"You did good, bub. See you again sometime. -Sy"

"Huh. Guess they liked my nickname for 'em."

The planetarium was as silent as ever as the constellations pranced through the artificial sky, save for a single song.

The two men were in an embrace, arms around one another, moving to a song Jedediah was singing.

"Them good ol' boys were drinkin' whiskey n' rye, singing 'this'll be the day that I die.'"

They came to a stop as they met one another's gaze.

"You gonna sing the next one?"

"Of course."

The two men began their dance again. Lost in one another's eyes, the stars of the planetarium falling like a meteor shower. Octavius leaned in to get closer to those eyes. They at last closed as their lips met. Nothing on any plane, mortal or ethereal, mattered in this moment. Nothing but one another.

Octavius began to sing.

*I can still see your face
Although the years may have forced some change
And I know I'm no longer the same
And I hope I don't show it
I hope I don't show it
But my heart's the same.*

Epilogue

Ahkmenrah opened his eyes in a place he did not recognize. This was not his sarcophagus. It was something else entirely. Tinted windows, leather seats, rain on the roof. A car.

"Pardon me-"

Ahkmenrah tried to speak, but his voice was raspy and burnt. He could taste smoke in his mouth.

"I'd rest if I was you, bub."

Ahkmenrah recognized that voice. With a charred limb, Ahkmenrah managed to open the partition.

"Who are you?"

The driver looked back at the pharaoh, eyes burning with a holy light that Ahkmenrah recognized.

"I've got a million names, bub. Given your upbringing, you'd probably call me Anubis." Ahkmenrah remembered.

"I was there at Arcadia."

The cab screeched to a sudden halt. The driver leaned back to look at Ahkmenrah, elbow over the partition.

"So ya finally bit it!"

The smile on their face was full of glory.

"Let's not waste time, then, you gotta get judged and off to paradise with the rest of 'em."

Ahkmenrah did not know what Psychopomp meant, but somehow felt at ease. "The rest of them?" He coughed out.

"Your buddies at the museum! I managed to get Larry and Nick first, damn human lifespans. Then Ol' Ted melted during transport and was re-used for candles. Attila was thrown out and got compacted."

Ahkmenrah finally understood what 'too dark' was.

"Wea got sent to an army factory when they discovered plastic shells and needed more. The monkey ended up decomposing too much to be repaired. The minis got it real nasty, another fire; same one that got you, actually."

Psychopomp laughed at a joke only they got.

"At least this time I didn't yank those two lovebirds outta Pompeii!"

Ahkmenrah felt sick to his stomach.

"We... we died?"

Psychopomp nodded.

"Can't outrun death forever. Good news is, you n' the rest got connected pathways. Night never ends in your case, bub."

The taxi came to a stop in front of a large pyramid. Ahkmenrah's door opened, and his burns receded. He stepped out of the car, standing before the large building.

"I do hope my heart balances."

"Only one way to find out."

And the guide led the pharaoh up the steps.

"Here he comes!"

Jedediah called from the roof of Attila's yurt. The group had decided to spend the day in Attila's steppe and were taking a break from their riding trail. Jedediah hopped down from the roof as the others came out of the structure. He and Octavius were a more substantial size now, Octavius rivalling Attila in height and Jedediah finally able to meet Larry's gaze.

Psychopomp's taxi parked right in front of the tent's door.

"Oi, night party! Got one last latecomer!"

The door opened as Ahkmenrah stepped out, his golden outfit now dyed purple, still shining in the sun.

"Hi, Ahk," Nick said with a smile. Larry was with him, sitting in a rocking chair with Dexter.

"Welcome home, lad," Teddy said, his voice choking with tears.

"It's good to see you again, Ahkmenrah," Sacajawea wiped a tear from her eye.

"Ahky!" Attila called from the back of the crowd.

"Took ya long enough!" Jedediah said with a laugh.

"We've been waiting for you!" Octavius called, his arm around Jedediah's shoulders.

Ahkmenrah's eyes filled with tears.

And he ran to the open arms of his family.