

THE QUEER AND TIMES OF KASSANDRA ASSIS

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I

ON the day Cassandra Assis decides to steal a time machine to search for her soulmate, the skies are clear, and her heart is set.

“This was your idea.”

“No, I said I wouldn’t stop you,” Aminah says. “Two very different things.”

Kassandra narrows her eyes at the device in her hands. It’s shaped like an old clock, one of the antiques that are sold to the higher-ups still obsessed with the past. Kassandra had only seen it behind plex walls — so thick with glass that the clock was only a white light reflection. Relics of a past that’s not so far gone now, just within reach. If you have the right means.

Or, in Kassandra’s case, if you have the right work pass, and the right guts to do something incredibly, astonishingly stupid. Her best friend sighs. Aminah reaches out her dark brown hand to touch the device, covering Kassandra’s

own. The sensation tingles, or maybe it was only the device in their hands. It stirs and whirs, the mechanisms hidden behind the polished mother-of-pearl circle.

“When they talked of the time machines in the

Archives, I always thought it was going to be a big blue box or something,” Aminah says, her purple nails swiping over it. “This thing just seems like they’re begging for people to steal it.”

“Borrow,” Kassandra corrects. Aminah smirks. “Sure.”

Aminah carefully turns the device to the back, but there’s nothing marking it as special. There are probably another thousand like this one issued by the company, rented at leisure for those who want a special kind of holiday. Kassandra hadn’t planned on picking one up after it had been returned—and wrongly filed—but she couldn’t refuse its siren’s call.

Not when it promised her so much. She takes a deep breath, letting herself really make this decision. Letting

herself hope. There's a tiny spark in her heart. Cassandra always tries to be the realist, but there's something about holding a time machine in her hands that makes her forget. With the arched silvery dome of the city filtering the air from outside, her combat boots sinking into the artificial grass that sways unevenly, Cassandra lets herself dream. Around them, in the park, she spots some other couples, strolling with arms wound around each other.

As if reading her mind, Aminah says, "You don't have to do this."

Kassandra meets Aminah's eyes, which blink back through the lenses of her gold-framed glasses. Something in Aminah's expression makes Cassandra's fists close around the device. "I'm tired of waiting for someone to find me. Who knows if who I'm looking for isn't lost in time?"

"Who knows if they're not standing right in front of you?" Aminah shoots back.

"We're wasting time," Cassandra snaps, even though time is the only thing both of them have at their disposal. She turns the handle of the clock, turns it all the way back, and suddenly, neither she nor Aminah are there anymore.

II

The world is a tunnel of light and waves. Particles dissolve around them through a grid, and the only sound is the ticking of the clock, constant, looping around them both. The clock ticks, and the world goes all silver and white and blue and then nothing; in one blink, they are back where they started. It takes a moment for Cassandra's eyes to adjust. They aren't back where they started.

Though, the grass looks green. The sky looks blue. Above them, the clouds sway in the dome, but it isn't a dome — it stretches beyond the mountains in the horizon, and vanishes beyond the glinting of — is that water? Vast as the eyes can see, swaying with waves, sparkling in white foam. The breeze carries its scent to them, washing them anew, and it's sticky with the salt.

She has no idea where she is. She doesn't know why she thought she would — the time machine takes you where you are meant to go, or so the company says, selling the past as if it's just another product. "History happens now" is the motto, and that's why the time machine is so simple. There is no need for a complex operation, merely the person holding it in their hands and making the wish.

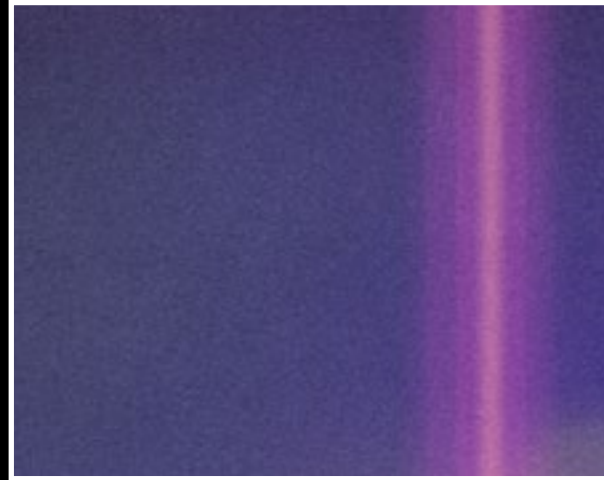
Aminah puts her hands on her waist, looking around with narrowed eyes.

"Hmm," she says thoughtfully. "Guess the machine doesn't think you seeing the giant chickens is important."

"You're making that up."

"No, I swear. Saw a skeleton of it once in the back of the Archives. Giant chicken, incredibly small arms."

"Next time we steal a time machine, you get a turn, then."



The breeze prickles the shaved back of her head, and Cassandra quickly smooths her sidecut so it doesn't get in the way.

"How do we know when you've found ... ?" Aminah's voice trails off slightly.

She doesn't specify what. Cassandra had spoken of her plan only once, drunk and daydreaming, too embarrassed to let anyone else hear her confession but Aminah. *Soulmate* sounded like the sort of thing to be said only in whispers, and even thinking it Cassandra felt her cheeks burn. But there had to be someone out there for her — if she didn't find them in her own time, maybe she had to start looking in other places.

"I'll know it when I see it," Cassandra says with a conviction she doesn't feel. It's what she has been told her whole life. It's what everyone around her described when she asked. Everyone knew when they saw it. If the time machine worked, and took her to the past and her deepest desire, what she was looking for had to be somewhere. She only had to find it.

III

They walk for what feels like miles. She'd never walked in a straight line for so long without hitting some kind of wall, either from the domes or the train tracks. Here, their feet crush the ground; here, her boots leave strange markings upon the wet earth. It all feels like a mirage.

And then, in the distance, Cassandra spots the first sign of life. Two men, their legs intertwined with each other's as they lie on the grass, their fingers in each other's hair. There are discarded pieces of metal on the field next to them, and it jars her to see it's armor. *Ancient* armor. There

are few antiquities Cassandra knows, and the few she does are usually from her line of work—armors and weapons and shields. There are two crossed spears next to them, sunk into the ground.

They are both talking, sometimes kissing, and she should feel bad for looking, for witnessing such an intimate moment when they thought no one else was intruding. But she can't move. Her heart clutches in her chest, longing for what they have. She can't really discern their features from so far away, but somehow, she feels like a part of her knows them—a part of her that lay dormant and is now slowly awakening.

The time machine was meant to take her to her soulmate. That's what she's looking for. These others are already bonded, already so enthralled in their own world that they don't notice the onlookers. There's nothing for her here.

Except that she can't look away. They witness them picking up their lances, putting back on their armor, the smallest of touches as the buckles slide into place. One of them kneels to tie the other's sandals. There is a sobriety to this moment; a solemn preparation. This is a moment that lasts only a few minutes, but is somehow remembered forever.

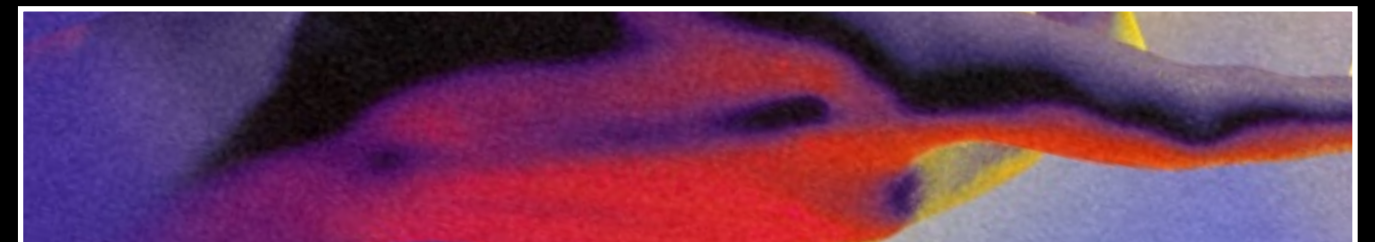
When they both leave, Cassandra is curious enough to follow them, Aminah trailing her. When they come upon the battlefield, however, both of them turn back. They know what wars have done to the planet, and they know nothing good ever comes of it. Cassandra hopes, in her heart, that they found a way through, or that at least, they are not only remembered for the glory of the bloodshed, but for that moment she saw on the grass.

IV

Kassandra tries the clock again; maybe it just hadn't read her right the first time. Maybe it needed another moment with her to see what she really wanted.

The scenery dissolves, and they are somewhere else, but not too far — both of them witness another couple, hand in hand, leaving flowers on a monument. She blinks when she sees the carving on the stone, recognizing the other pair they watched.

One of them wears a strange crown of leaves in his hair, their armor not too different. They must still be too far back in time. There are other witnesses here — a whole



army, standing in endless lines, their armor brown while the men at the front wear gold. Cassandra looks around, but there are too many people. It's impossible to find what she's looking for here, even if she stood face-to-face with each soldier.

There is a speech in front of the monument, but it's no use listening because they don't speak the language. There is applause when the speech is done, and the man takes the other's hand. The gesture seems like defiance, hope, all at once.

In her hands, the clock shifts them on its own. Each time, they move through a different scenery and a different time. At first, Cassandra can't determine what it's trying to show her — there are coincidences, but that's not what she came here for — and yet, it can't be overlooked. They are always couples. They are always queer couples.

It has been long since the distinction had to be made, but she can't help but make it here, in the context of the past. Here, it matters. Here, it's as if history is trying to make her see what she is, in some sort of way. Only Cassandra has always known who she is.

That's not what she came to find. Cassandra never had family. She had her friends. She had Aminah. That was it.

But it wasn't *enough*. Everywhere she looked, there was a part of her missing, a part that she always sought, always wanted, but never found. It could take time, but she would find what she came for. She still has faith.

When they are through with their seventh trip, when their knees stopped wobbling when the atoms dissolved, when the light of the travel becomes dim to their eyes, and when the chiming of the clock striking its next destination is as familiar to them as the beat of their own hearts, it's Aminah who suggests they consider an alternative.

"Maybe it's broken?"

"It can't be broken," Cassandra says. "It's definitely taking us somewhere. We're definitely working through time."

"Point." Aminah sighs. "But let's hypothesize."

"You're such a nerd."

"I'm just exploring possibilities. Maybe there's a chance we messed up and it's reading mine instead of yours." She muses. "Though to be honest, if it did, we would *definitely* be seeing the giant chickens."

Kassandra tries to not let the comment sink. Maybe she did steal a broken time machine. Just her luck. Or maybe the problem is not the machine. Maybe it's just her.

"The whole soulmate thing's bull, anyway," Aminah says, as always seeming to drive straight to the point. "Half of them wind up dead. Look at the Jesus guy. Great inspirational religious speech. Terrible love story."

"That's not the life lesson I was hoping to learn."

"Life lessons are never predictable. That's another life lesson."

Kassandra feels her throat tighten. How much more would they have to look? How many other couples would she watch, her heart aching, not knowing why her own story was missing? How many times would she travel to find nothing at all?

"We should head home," Aminah says.

"Not yet," replies Kassandra.

V

Kassandra wants to understand.

There has to be some sort of *reason* behind it. Her head doesn't swim from the travels, but it swims from the encounters.

The clock, with its mother-of-pearl display, betrays no emotion. They pass through another couple, women in the garden, one languid and tall and blond, the other shorter, with cropped black hair, lounging with dogs. Kassandra is reaching her limit, she takes one look and the clock turns once more in her hand. This time, they land in the doorstep of an archive.

"Look," Aminah points to picture of the women they had just seen together. "It's them again."

They enter the archive, which is not nearly as grand or as tall as the one back home, but rather cozy, with a rainbow flag upfront. The purpose is the same, however, to record and to witness. Next to the picture of the women, Kassandra recognizes the scribbles on the wall.

Aminah reads her the translation, working slowly through the words, *I am reduced to a thing that wants Virginia*. A letter, then. A proof that this bond had existed.

They walk through the hallowed halls with shady light, and no one else is there but them. Kassandra's eyes wander over the walls, and she sees the pictures and the paintings. They are scarce, but are treated with such preciousness.

"Wonder how many other things we lost," Aminah says behind her, her voice awed as her hands touch the walls. "How many we just couldn't find."

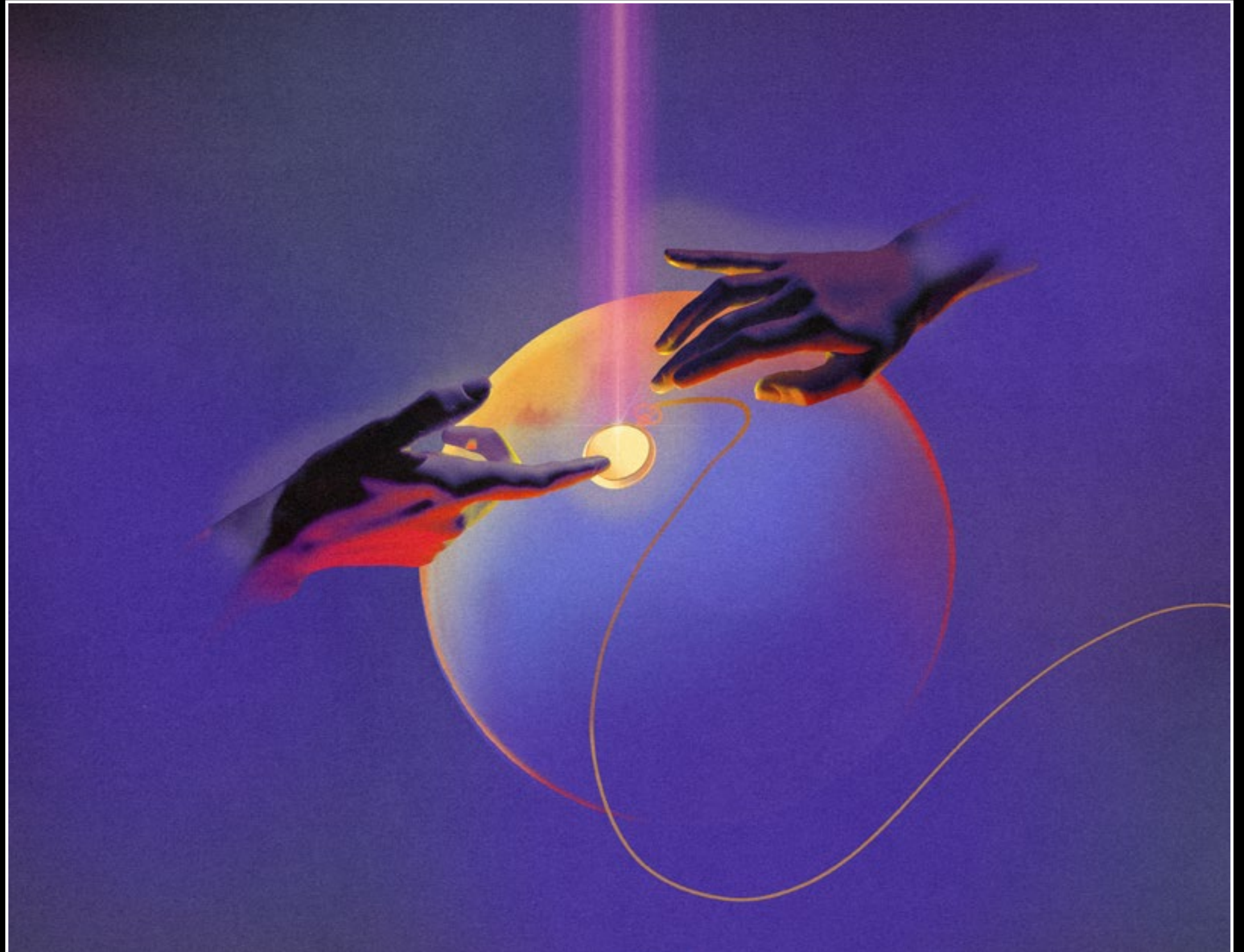
"We have time machines now," Kassandra points out, her ill-temper taking a turn for the worse.

"What you're witnessing is a miracle," Aminah says casually. "Everywhere we've been. Things building upon things. Nothing is ever isolated. You're just being too dense to acknowledge it." She continues down her path, looking up at all the paintings, all the letters, all the records. Aminah knows some of the older languages from working in the Archives, but Kassandra has never had much interest in learning things that belonged to the past.

She comes across a mirror, stops short. Aminah almost stumbles into her, and for a moment, both of them gaze into the reflection. Aminah's eyes dart to Kassandra's own, dip to her mouth, and she looks away.

"No luck yet?" She pipes.

"Do you think this was a stupid idea?"



"I think it's stupid that we don't get to see the giant chickens," Aminah answers immediately. "What are you so worried about?"

"We've been everywhere already. We've seen ... all those people. All those couples. And I have nothing." She pauses, trying to work out her own thoughts, the idea that maybe the time machine is broken and that she won't find whatever she's looking for, and she's just doomed to stay alone. "What if — there's something wrong with me?"

"That's absurd. There's not something wrong with you." She tilts her head. "There's like, a lot."

"Is that your idea of cheering me up?"

"Is it working?"

Kassadra gives her an entirely helpless smile. Aminah smirks.

VI

The story repeats and moves forward. Again, and again, they are brought to the same purpose. The same thing, reframed. If only Cassandra could understand what the purpose is.

By the 15th travel, the chiming is familiar. They witness no more than a kiss or handholding.

On the 37th, Cassandra has identified the pattern even faster, and it's only a blink of an eye before the clock moves forward again.

When they're on the 53rd travel, Cassandra turns away before she walks a single step.

"There's something wrong," Cassandra says. "This can't be all. Every time it takes us somewhere else, but all these people ... they already found what they were looking for. It's not why I came."

"You don't need to be angry about it."

"I'm not angry." She is seething. What a waste of time and resources. It's just the same motif over and over. "There's just a reason that people will pay their life savings to get a go with this damned thing. This can't be all."

If it were, Cassandra would be desperately suing for a refund — if only she had gotten it through legitimate means.

Aminah watches her carefully, but before she can open her mouth, Cassandra touches the clock and it impels them again.

She knows what Aminah is going to say, and she doesn't want to hear.

So she travels.

Again.

Again.

And again.

VII

"Kassandra, stop."

The word is like an order, and it halts her midstep. Aminah's tone is dark. When Cassandra looks back at her, she isn't following, her arms crossed over her chest.

"What?"

"You can't keep doing this," she says. "Enough. Let's go back home."

"I'm not done."

"Then take me back."

"I thought you wanted to do this with me." Cassandra tries not to let the hurt show in her voice, the trembling that she feels in her toes. "You're backing out now?"

Aminah shifts her weight, but her arms remain firmly crossed over her chest. "I'm not backing out. I'm trying to stop you before you get hurt."

"You don't have to worry about me."

"Kassandra, all I've ever done is worry about you." Aminah meets her eyes. Even through the lenses, her gaze is intense. "I knew you weren't going to change your mind, but enough is enough. All I see is you shrinking back. You're not even looking at what it's trying to show you."

Kassandra feels the words like a stab of pain. "So you do think it's a stupid idea."

"Aminah drags a finger through her hair. "Of course I think it's stupid. I've been telling you that from the start. Come on."

Kassandra looks at the clock in her hands, the promise unfulfilled. "Just — " Aminah starts saying again. "Why do you think it's showing you all this?"

Kassandra opens her mouth to speak, but no words come out. It feels like it's rubbing it in her face — showing people enjoying the thing she's always wanted.

"No clue?" Aminah asks. "If you don't know by now, maybe you won't figure out."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying I'm not going to stand by while you torture yourself looking for something that you won't find."

Kassandra feels her bravado falter. "Do you think I'm so terrible that I don't have a soul to match my own?"

"No, I just think you hate the idea of being alone so much you'd rather spend your life running away from the mere thought of being lonely for five seconds."

Kassandra's eyes fill with water, her throat drying out in a second. Aminah isn't even cruel—she says it matter-of-factly, the truth out there for anyone to see.

Kassandra crumbles, and the only way she can fight back is the only way she learned. Shoving everything away.

"Then you can leave," Cassandra says, offering the clock back. "I don't need your help. I don't need you."

Aminah flinches, her expression sharp. Instead of stepping away, Aminah approaches until there are mere inches between her and Cassandra. "You wouldn't know somebody cared for you if they punched your nose. I'm done."

With a sudden movement, Aminah snatches the clock from Cassandra's hand. She's angry, as angry as



Kassandra has ever seen her. Her eyes are a fiery fury. "Hand that back to me, you'll —"

"Break it?" Aminah suggests. "I can't wait to be stranded with you, a self-centered ass."

Kassandra tries to snatch it back, but Aminah's fingers dig half-moons into the back of her hands with her nails. Kassandra looks up, and realizes Aminah is crying, a tear smearing down her cheek. Kassandra is then hit full force with what she's doing, but she doesn't want to turn back.

She isn't done yet. She *can't* be done. She needs to find what she came for. She needs to understand why everyone found their path except her.

The stupid clock only showed the happiness of others, never letting her glimpse her own. Suddenly, she feels rage again — a deep resentment of the way her whole life happened, and how she doesn't even know if she is chasing something or running away from it.

The clock was trying to teach her a lesson, but it only embittered her. She wasn't going where she needed to go.

The clock strikes, and both of them are pulled away.

VIII

It takes a second for Kassandra's body to realize she's in danger. There's a crowd around her—people have signs up, the letters in a language she can't read—and they're shouting. There's smoke, and there's fire and broken glass on the pavement, and there are people screaming in the background. She doesn't need to speak the language to know what's happening. Violence is violence wherever and whenever it's spoken. Those who suffer always know its meaning, even if they don't know its words.

"Aminah?" Kassandra asks, spinning wildly. The crowd itself is already turning, and something roils in the pit of her stomach. She already regrets the words she said a moment before, already wants to take them back. Fear rises to her throat, and the popping sound gets louder, the smoke thicker.

Someone shoves her out of the way. She sees, between the crowd, uniformed men in blue with black helmets and shiny badges, pressing forward as people turn their backs. The panic rises again. The signs get trampled under her booted feet.

Her eyes haven't adjusted to this time, but her heart is speeding, and she can hear her heartbeat in her ears, drumming hoarse.

Someone pulls her hand, makes the universal gesture of *come on*, and she lets herself get pulled by a girl with skin darker than her own, but who doesn't look too different from her — back through the streets, houses and stores made of red bricks, with glass crunching beneath their feet. A burned building stands in the background, blackened and imposing.

She looks at the girl for one long moment. Maybe this is it. Maybe in the midst of this chaos, this is who she's looking for.

She lives in that second of their eyes meeting, but whatever Kassandra expected to feel is not there. There is no instant spark. There is no immediate belonging.

She lets go of the girl's hand, and she turns back to try and find Aminah.

And while she searches the crowd, Kassandra recognizes what she has learned to identify in all of the travels. Even when they're running away, there are people holding each other's hands. People wearing all sorts of colorful clothes, different haircuts, high heels, but still running together. One girl embracing another, trying to protect themselves, and when they shift, Kassandra spots her.

"Aminah!" She shouts, hoping it's louder than the popping and the ringing of her ears. Her voice is lost amidst the crowd. "*Aminah!*"

Aminah turns her head. Panic is visible on her face. If there's anger or guilt, they're asphyxiated by the circumstances. She fights through the drove, but it only gets tighter.

Kassandra tries to move forward, but another uniform holds her back. His voice is scratchy and hoarse and incomprehensible, but in her own way, Kassandra understands what he wants and all her rage comes bubbling to the surface. He reaches out for his stick, and Kassandra kicks back. There's a victory to be had here, even just in the fighting. Sometimes, the fighting is all there is. It's the hope that lives on.

Kassandra is itching for it, and she lets herself have this one. Uses her gut, as the only thing that's never failed her. One hundred men can't stop her from crossing that crowd. One hundred men can't keep her from reaching Aminah.

The sea of uniforms is endless, but somehow, they keep rising still. There's blood on the street, but the blood that runs in her veins is hotter. She fights as if her life depends on it, because it does. She is not alone, in this moment.

Finally, there's a break. She kicks out with one last remaining adrenaline rush, shoulders through the barrier of people who think they can stand in her way.



She meets Aminah's eyes across the crowd. Aminah reaches for Kassandra, but just as she does, the clock in Kassandra's pocket strikes. Terror fills her, and she stretches for the hand that is extended toward her.

She never makes it in time.

IX

Kassandra opens her eyes, and she is alone.

X

"Take me back," she orders the clock. "Stupid thing. Take. Me. Back."

"The clock stays the same. It continues to tick. Kassandra looks around wildly. She has no idea where she is. She doesn't care anymore.

She presses the clock into her hand. Presses the sweat of her palms. Presses the blood from her open brow. The clock remains taciturn. Nothing moves it, and Kassandra looks up again, feeling the constriction of her throat, the tightening of her muscles. "Take me," she murmurs. "Just take me."

She feels its ticking, the world dissolving. When she opens her eyes once more, there is another time, another street, another light. Alone.

She murmurs the order once more, her heart aching. She has to find Aminah. She can't leave her behind.

Buildings. People. Sounds.

Forward.

Whenever she opens her eyes, she expects to be back there, but instead, time only moves forward — it leaps and swirls and roils — it cruises and rambles and sails — and she is nowhere close to where she needs to be. Regret undates her vision; anguish fills her heart. She should have paid more attention. She shouldn't have fought back. She shouldn't have tried to prove anything.

Forward.

There's only one way to go. If there was ever a lesson to learn, it was that in the end, she didn't want to be alone. And that's how she ended up.

Forward.

Lights, closer to home. Forward was the way, even when she didn't want it. Forward because history was lost to time, forgotten, and everything that was the past got left in the past. The past was for those who could be privileged enough to relish it. The past didn't belong to her.

Forward.

Except it had. Everywhere she was taken, there was a story. Not her story, but a story like hers. A story of those who couldn't be. A story of those who had been left behind. And even though there was a brighter future, this was still her past. This was still what she had been built on.

Forward.

She wasn't leaving them behind anymore. She refused to. Even if she didn't find what she had traveled for, she had found something else. All those who had hid; all those who weren't what everyone else expected; all those who had taken their time to understand who they were; all those who were not afraid to show it. Maybe Kassandra's soul didn't belong to a person, maybe it belonged somewhere scattered through the sands of time — in all the tight places and in the pieces of paper and the sundered shards of those who had tried to break people like her.

Forward.

They survived. They always did. Wasn't that what Aminah was trying to show her? Wasn't that history, after all? Not just the past, but what they could find in the future because of it?

Forward.

She isn't alone. She never will be.

Forward.

XI

The street is familiar. There are differences — buildings that are older, shops that changed — but Kassandra has been thinking about this place for what feels like eternity and a second both. There are the brown houses made of brick, the glass of the windows, but there is more electrical buzzing, people with devices in their hands, looking down at themselves.

No one notices her there except for one person.

She's much older, but Kassandra recognizes her eyes. They remain the same.

"Took you long enough," Aminah says in greeting. "Any longer and my joints wouldn't have made it."

"Kassandra blinks hard, swallows even harder. Aminah's skin is wrinkled from age. Kassandra has never seen anyone look that old — back home, no one ever does. But the aging suits her. Some of her hair is white, and she wears the strange clothes the other people do, but still in her signature bright colors.

There are so many things that she could say. Instead, she says, "I got lost."

"Did you? What a surprise."

"I thought this was your idea."

"I said I wouldn't stop you," Aminah says. "Two very different things."

Kassandra wraps her in a hug. Aminah's bones look brittle, but she hugs as tightly as she can. She breathes in the chamomile scent that is still so very her. "I will always wait for you," Aminah whispers in her ears. "Don't lose me this time."

"She steps away, gives her a number one smirk that hasn't changed.

Kassandra presses the clock again, and she goes back in time, knowing exactly what she'll find.



She meets Aminah a little worse for wear, but having survived. She's sitting just outside a broken shop window, her straight hair hanging loose over her shoulder. She jolts when she sees Cassandra, and there's a rainbow of emotions that cross her face. Cassandra reads them like a love letter. Relief, guilt, solace, and something else she has ignored for far too long.

Cassandra comes forward and kneels in front of Aminah, slipping her hand into hers.

"Sorry it took me so long," Cassandra says quietly. A part of her means losing her to time. Another part of her just means something else.

"I knew you'd have to come," Aminah says. "You'd get lost if you didn't."

Cassandra lets out a chuckle. Their fight never seems so long ago. So utterly pointless. Nothing seems worth being separated. Cassandra never had a family, but she has Aminah. "I'm sorry," Cassandra says first. "I was so caught up with everything that I didn't understand what you'd been saying. Not until I lost you."

"You didn't lose me. You were gone for what, ten whole minutes."

Cassandra reaches up to Aminah's face, brushes her hair aside. Adjusts the frame of her glasses. Aminah holds in a breath and blinks rapidly, but she doesn't move. "I almost did. I wanted to find someone who was here all along."

Aminah lets out the smallest of shudders, but Cassandra holds her hand firm, and when she tilts her head up, Aminah doesn't draw back. Cassandra leans forward and kisses her best friend, takes her without any fear.

"Huh," Aminah says when she's done. "This wasn't how I'd envisioned it. Always thought it would have to be me. You're so thickheaded."

Cassandra laughs, awkwardly. "Can you forgive me for dragging you all the way here?"

"Are you kidding me? You got me a full day off work. Besides, you just proved me right." She gives Cassandra a pointed look. "I did say the whole soulmate thing was bull."

"Aminah, a lot of what *you* say is bull."

"Yes, one of my many charms." She brushes her thumb against Cassandra's cheek. The gesture is tender, soft, and it's both an echo of what they had before and what they'll have in the future. Aminah will always be her friend. That is one thing that won't change. "You want to go back home?"

Cassandra knows, for the first time, what she really wants. She says, "I have another idea."

"I really hope it's the giant chickens." Cassandra smiles, and she wraps their hands together around the time machine.

XII

Cassandra goes back again, and this time, she looks not as someone in search for someone else, but someone who has found exactly what she wanted.

She travels with Aminah, hand in hand, and they witness everything once again now that she understands. They come back to the things they've seen blossom, they see it growing, and they try to commit it to memory. Try to memorialize the past not as a relic, but as a living thing, because it's part of their own lives.

Sometimes, it's easy. People who became known for what they are and what they did. People not unlike the two of them, who fought and lived and loved, and whose stand was so powerful that even when society tried its best to erase their existence, they weren't forgotten. Other times, it's harder. History gets lost, erased, rewritten by the conquerors. Even coming back to it now — it isn't the same. Names and traditions and people wiped from the books; because it was forbidden, because it was dangerous, because some of them were never meant to be remembered. Cassandra finds them all the same. They witness not their pain, but the smaller moments: stolen kisses, a loving look, a poem read to a person standing far away in the shadows on the other side of the room. When she can, she writes their names down. Writes some of their stories, writes out the year. Compiles it in an archive that's written in ink that runs from her heart.

Aminah stays by her side. Time is on their side, and they refuse to leave their greatest ally. Where things were lost, they find them. Where names were forgotten, they are recalled. Where there is love, they immortalize it.

There is history, past, present, future, and they are both willing to remember it.