

Daughter Time

“In the dark times

Will there also be singing?

Yes, there will also be singing.

About the dark times.”

- Bertolt Brecht

On the day everything started, muffled giggles echoed across the shoddy playground. An impromptu game of truth or dare had captured our collective attention.

“Tilda,” one snot-nosed girl asked the gorgeous red-headed girl on the teeter-totter. “Who do you want to marry?”

Tilda didn’t answer, just smiled serenely.

“I dare you to marry *him*,” the other girl snickered and pointed. At me. My face turned fire-engine red.

“Okay,” Tilda said, still smiling. A buzz of surprise ran through the audience.

We stood face to face while a boy lisped through makeshift wedding vows.

“Do you promise to marry Evren?”

“Yes,” Tilda said. Everyone giggled, and a chorus of “ew” arose.

“Evren, do you promise to marry Tilda, forever and ever, until the end of the world?”

“Yes,” I said, uncharacteristically confident.

“K-I-S-S-I-N-G,” everyone chanted. She pecked me on the lips, and a fresh chorus of “ews” rang out.

Time seemed to crystallize. I felt my life stretch out before me, and I saw myself clutching the prone body of a young girl as the buildings around us collapsed into rubble. This wasn’t unusual for me. Even at the age of five, I had a morbid fascination with endings. I would skip to the end of books, ask for spoilers for the latest movie, peek at the answers to worksheets. Visions of disasters and imagining the end of everything were by no means new to me.

Suddenly, fear flared in Tilda’s eyes. She plucked a hair from my head, dropped the hair and whispered, “Oh no.” Like that, she was gone, sprinting toward the nearby forest. I squatted down and examined the hair, silvery white with age, then stayed there a while, bewildered and alone, an astronaut jettisoned from his shuttle.

I didn’t see Tilda again for ten years.

News of her departure spread like the plague, and I was quarantined and examined with morbid curiosity. Whispers echoed in the hallway, and suspicious glances were thrown my way, suggesting that my very existence was the reason for Tilda’s disappearance. I spent grade school, junior high, and most of high school on autopilot, wandering blindly through my life.

First day of junior year, I started a new school. I hunched my back, trying to make myself smaller, and made my way to English class, lucky to not run into any overly-friendly extroverts looking to talk to the new kid.

As the bell rang and the rest of the class filed in, the teacher began to take roll.

“Evren.”

“Here,” I said.

“Samantha.”

“Here.”

“Jacob.”

“Present.”

“Tilda.”

“Here.”

I made no perceptible movement, but my eyes flicked to the source of her voice. She was already staring at me. We both looked away, but not quickly enough to avoid the electric jolt of recognition.

“Tell someone new what you did over the summer,” the teacher announced to the room, but despite her valiant efforts, everyone congealed back into their usual friend groups. I was new, though — there was no group for me to stick to.

Instead, I stood in the corner of the classroom, while Tilda sat with people whispering bland compliments to each other. Every so often my gaze would drift towards her before I’d catch myself and force myself to stare out the window. At the end of class, she bumped into me, sending me staggering into the wall. Everyone else giggled as I seethed with fury and shame, but she was looking out of the window too, as if trying to discover what had captivated my interest.

“Did you make any new friends today?” Mom asked when I got home that day. “It’s been some time now.”

“An old one,” I grumbled.

Mom raised an eyebrow. “What’s their name?”

“Tilda,” I said.

Her other eyebrow went up. “A girl?”

I rolled my eyes internally, knowing what was coming. “Yeah, a girl.”

She pursed her lips. “We moved here so you could have a better education and stop skipping class. No dating before college, okay?”

I headed into my room.

A few weeks later Tilda slid into the open chair across from me at lunch, and gripped my hands.

“What’s your biggest regret?”

“My... my what?” I stammered.

“Never mind,” she gave me a toothy grin and skipped away. Her friends from the first day were nowhere to be seen. I came to learn that this was the way she operated, flitting from group to group, never staying long enough to be known, leaving groups fractured, blaming each other for scaring her away, just like they had me.

“Wait,” I called. She stopped and looked straight into my eyes, and I saw another vision of my life. Tilda and I were sitting in a laboratory. Panicked researchers hurried around a hospital bed. Spreadsheets showing numbers of the infected rose as the patient on the hospital bed continued to cough up blood. Then I blinked and all I saw was Tilda, standing there, waiting for an answer.

“I regret not working harder,” I said. “If I’d spent more time in my room studying I might’ve been able to skip this new school and avoided all this.”

She tilted her head and narrowed her eyebrows, and I had the feeling she was looking straight through me. “That’s a load of crap,” she said finally.

“Obviously,” I forced a laugh. She walked back to me and sat down.

“Where have you been, Tilda?” I asked her. “Why are you here now?”

She ignored me and asked her own question. “What have *you* been doing for the past ten years?”

“Me? Nothing, really.”

Tilda’s gaze hardened into a glare. “Ten years of nothing? Is that where your gray hairs are from, Rip Van Winkle?”

My hand went automatically to the patch of silvery hair I'd been growing since kindergarten. "I think it's genetic."

"Seriously," she pressed. "Nothing?"

"What do you want me to say?" I shrugged. "I haven't been doing anything. I didn't make any new friends. Didn't try in school. Didn't pick up a sport or an instrument. I'm right where you left me.."

She clenched her fists, still unsatisfied. "No one spends ten years doing nothing."

I considered that.

"Well, one thing," I lowered my voice. "I memorized *The Aeneid*. All 9,883 lines. And I've been trying to learn some languages. Ancient Greek, Old Norse, that kind of thing."

The lines around her eyes softened, and her mouth cracked in a slight smile.

"There's something about a story that transcends thousands of years, transcends written language itself, and about languages that still live on despite being labeled 'dead'. Something that might live on as the world crumbles..." I trailed off when I saw the look on her face. "Sorry. It's kind of nerdy."

She laughed, throwing her head back, her eyes squinched into two merry crescent moons. "Arma virumque cano, Troiae qui primus ab oris/Italiam, fato profugus, Laviniaque venit. It's *very* nerdy," she said. "But it's not nothing."

When I'd first met her, in kindergarten, I'd had the odd feeling that I wasn't really meeting someone human. Now, I was convinced she was just another sixteen-year-old geek, albeit one who could, I soon found out, quote fluently from fifteen different translations and the original Latin of *The Aeneid*.

She talked faster than anyone I had ever met, each word cut with unbelievable precision. Her hands were never unoccupied, fidgeting, tapping, running through her hair, or twisting one of the many iridescent rings on her fingers. I found myself emulating her carefree attitude, managing to seize joy and forget about my endless nihilism every once in a while. We'd talk for what felt like days, when in reality only a few minutes had passed. I could never figure out where she'd managed to glean those extra golden slivers of time and why she'd chosen to give them to me, but I didn't ask any questions.

"Don't forget to do your chemistry homework," Mom called from the kitchen.

"I know," I grumbled. I'd been in the process of doing it, but now there was nothing I wanted less to do.

"Remember, you're an adult now, so you have to manage your time," she continued.

"I know," I rolled my eyes. *So why are you treating me like a kid?*

I half-assed the rest of the worksheet and stuffed it into my bag, not really caring that it'd be crumpled and torn when I turned it in the next day.

I grabbed my wallet, phone, and keys and opened the door. In a second, my mom was standing behind me, materializing from the kitchen with the kind of speed only a mother can muster.

"Where are you going?"

"Out with Tilda," I said, pulling on my shoes.

"Again?" Mom's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Are you done with your homework?"

I gritted my teeth. "Yep, pretty much."

"Pretty much?" She was raising her voice. "There's plenty of extension work to do as well, you know. Do you still want to get into a good college?"

I shrugged noncommittally. "I'm an adult, right? I'm managing it."

"Watch your tone," she warned me, but I was already gone, letting the door slam satisfyingly behind me.

Tilda was waiting for me outside. I walked in sullen silence, kicking at stones. *Imagine spending time on chemistry homework when there's so little time in the first place.*

Before long, my imagination drifted to faraway battles and mystical creatures, my lips moving in silent recitations.

A chuckle from Tilda broke me from my trance.

"What's up?" I grinned back at her.

"Nothing," she said. "I used to think you were just daydreaming about nothing. But now I can see Aeneas and Dido and Turnus in your eyes."

"When I think about that stuff," I spoke slowly, trying to piece together the elusive feeling. "Time does the same weird thing it does when I'm with you. It stretches and warps. I lose myself in the legends. I don't have to worry about school or college or the end of the world."

"Baldr's death feels farther away," she nodded. I raised a questioning eyebrow.

"You've been out-nerded," she laughed. "Ragnarök, from the *Edda*."

"An end-of-the-world story? You know those are my favorite," I smiled. "I've been meaning to get back around to Old Norse. I just never really had the time."

Tilda shrugged. "No time like the present."

I got home and went straight for the neglected *Old Norse for Dummies* book on my desk. Instead, I found a brand new copy of *Gray's Anatomy*. Useful, if I needed to better picture Thor beating giants to death with Mjölnir.

"Mom!" I yelled. "Do you know where my Old Norse book went?"

She appeared at the door. "Oh, that thing? I threw it out."

"You what?" I wasn't sure I heard her correctly.

"It was practically decomposing."

"What the hell?" I said. "You can't just throw out my stuff when you feel like it."

Her back straightened imperceptibly, her jaw tightened. "Yes, I can."

"The world's gonna end anyway!" I exploded. "What's the point of reading things I don't want to read, if the apocalypse is literally right on our doorstep?"

"So then get your head out of the past," she said. "Divert the apocalypse. Build us a future. With medicine and engineering, not Greek and Latin."

I stood in the doorway, fuming silently.

"Hurry up," Mom said. "Go study. Clock is ticking."

I pulled an all-nighter, guzzling down lists of biological conditions out of pure spite. I ignored my mom on the way out, though I was burning to spit out some factoids about cell structure.

Tilda met me on the way to school, frowning her brow as she pointed out another patch of graying hair.

"Stress," I grunted.

"Do the gods, Euryalus, light this fire in our hearts or does each man's mad desire become his god?" Tilda sang softly.

"In the construction of the human body, it would appear essential, in the first place, to provide some dense and solid texture capable of giving support and attachment to the softer parts of the frame, and at the same time to protect in closed cavities the more important vital organs; and such a structure we find provided in the various bones, which form what is called the Skeleton." I droned. She looked at me, taken aback. I gave her a wan smile. "Gray's Anatomy. 1858."

“You know Henry Gray died at 34?” Tilda told me. “Smallpox. He caught it when he was treating his nephew. Though it was an abrupt ending, it was life of the highest caliber,” she continued. “He died having accomplished something heroic, doing something he loved.”

“Of course you know that,” I sighed.

“Can you say the same?” Tilda fixed me with a stare. A flash and I saw myself split into two. In one version I lay old and haggard, my eyes filled with the same idleness that often possessed me now. In another, I saw my body carried and venerated on a library card, a bizarre but oddly appropriate adaptation of a traditional hero’s death. In spite of myself, I snickered.

Tilda yanked me out of the vision. She examined my fingernails, pointing to one. “What happened here?”

I looked closer and saw that I’d broken it. “Must have cracked it on *Gray’s Anatomy*. I swear I had to evacuate an entire book of the *Aeneid* from my brain just to memorize some useless facts about bone structure.”

“Evacuate?” Tilda said, fixing me with a glare. “You just chose to *forget* about an entire chunk of your favorite epic?”

“It’s not that big of a deal,” I shrugged my shoulders. “*Veni, vidi, vici*, right? I came, I saw, I conquered. Conquered *Gray’s Anatomy* last night.” I smirked.

“Knowledge isn’t something to be conquered! You don’t use knowledge to conquer things!” She exploded. She pulled out a nail cutter, and gently cut the broken nail without it even bleeding.

Suddenly, she looked at the nail clipping, a strange look passing over her face. “No, no, no,” she murmured under her breath. “This isn’t good. This is NOT. GOOD.”

She runs her hands through her hair, breathless. “I have to go.”

“Oh,” I said, disappointed. “I’ll see you later today, then?”

“No,” she took a breath and looked me in the eyes again. The library card vision disappeared. All I saw this time was myself, left to face the end of the world alone. “Like, I have to go. I’m not good for you.”

“What?” I felt like I was underwater. She turned to run, but I managed to grab her hand.

“Please,” I begged her. “Not again. I can’t let you leave again.”

Her mouth was set in a hard line, but I could see the tears brimming in her eyes.

“You never answered me, you know.” For once, her words were slow. “What’s your biggest regret?” she asked me again.

I met her eyes, and cold fingers wrapped around my spine. I saw Tilda and I, sprawled on a battlefield, surrounded by the dead and dying. *Letting you go the first time*. I wanted to say. But I didn’t.

Tilda traced her thumb across my cheekbone. I flinched, involuntarily, watching my life unfold in a series of endings. Trains rumbling across the track, flowers left on nightstands, ghostlike embraces.

She pulled back, holding an eyelash between her fingers. Giving me a strained smile, she blew the eyelash away. “Make a wish.”

To stay in this moment forever, to be with you forever.

“Time,” I said finally. “More time.”

She gave me a pained smile, slipped through my grasp, and ran.

I had meant what I said, though. I couldn’t let her leave again.

I did my best to keep up with her as she slipped into the thick woods, trying not to curse too loudly when I ran constantly into branches. She danced across a river, using mossy stones for hopscotch. The same stones laughed at me as I slipped on them, almost getting washed away by the river. Time seemed to stretch and elongate, and soon the woods were shrouded in darkness despite daylight feeling only moments away.

Finally, after my arms and legs couldn't possibly have any more scratches and bruises, Tilda stopped. She stood in a clearing that glowed a sunny auburn, despite the depth of the night surrounding us. I stepped forward to get a better view, but it felt like moving through honey, sticky and sweet. Tilda reached out and plucked a shining petal of light, then blew on it like an eyelash. As I watched the sliver fly past my eyes, I had the horrifying feeling I was watching my life pass by from far away. I saw those dark visions once more; riots, natural disasters, pandemics, wars.

Knocked off balance by the visions, I almost lost her as she flitted deeper into the woods..

The journey wasn't as far this time. The castle appeared before my eyes, carved pillars and turrets stretching towards the sky, towers built of granite. A metal portcullis slashed through the air, and a wooden drawbridge thumped heavily at Tilda's feet. Her steps grew more reluctant the farther she traversed, but she finally raised a trembling hand and knocked on the ornate double doors.

"Dad?" she croaked. "Are you home?"

I crept forward and hid behind a pillar, letting the sound of the opening door obscure my footsteps. All at once, the grand illusion began to unravel. Cobwebs dotted the ceiling of what looked to be the interior of an abandoned shack. Paint peeled from the walls, furniture lay broken and tattered, and moonlight shone through broken windows.

In the middle of the room stood who must've been Tilda's father. His hair and beard were grizzled and unkempt, and he was dressed in a curious amalgam of ripped jeans and flowing robes. He had a thunderous look on his face.

"Daughter," he bellowed. "Have you brought back my scythe?"

She tossed him a pair of golden nail clippers, the same pair she'd used on me, a few hours before. I watched in disbelief as the metal twisted and stretched into an immense scythe, its crescent-moon blade drinking in the surrounding light, leaving an eerie glow in its wake. My broken fingernail throbbed like a phantom limb.

"Your efforts are futile," he said. "The scythe is not the source of my strength. It is a symbol of the inevitability of time, of endings. True power lies in changeability."

He pulled out an hourglass and beckoned at it. The grains of sand began to flow in reverse. I watched as Tilda shrunk until she looked no older than a toddler.

"You are responsible for this role of mine, this role of otherworldly importance. Yet you act as impudent and arrogant as a child."

This is so messed up. I thought. *Everything about this is so messed up.* But it was the last few words that really needled at me.

"She's not!" I yelled, praying that my voice wouldn't crack. "She's not a child!"

The hourglass began to flow forward once more, and Tilda turned back into herself, hacking and coughing. Her father pocketed the hourglass and met my eyes. My vision went black for a second. I saw nothing, though. Just the sun and moon, empty and devoid of light.

"Ah," he sneered. "The doomed boyfriend."

Tilda and I turned pink, stammering simultaneously. "Um, I'm not — we're not..."

He scoffed and emptied a reservoir of nail clippings from his scythe, examining each one. "You are wasteful with your time. You do not deserve my daughter."

I squinted at him. "Are those my nails?"

He ignored me. "Each one is worth several months on its own. Together, do you see how much you have squandered?"

"Dad," Tilda whined. "Don't even."

"Enough." He rubbed his temples. "I will have sufficient headaches cleaning up your mess. Leave me be."

He stalked off, muttering to himself. I sat by Tilda, rubbing her back until the last of her coughs had subsided. When she was sure her father was gone, she winked at me and pulled out an Apple Watch with a visual display of a pixelated, 8-bit hourglass. I didn't know whether to laugh or to cry.

"Who the hell was that?" I hissed. "Who the hell are *you*?"

"Do the math," she said. "All that time you spend daydreaming, I'm sure you can figure it out."

"Is your dad... Death?" I blabbered.

She made a face. "Death is a cheap upstart. My dad is the original."

She held up the Apple Watch, pointing to the grains of sand running down the hourglass. "We're running out of time. I have to fix this."

Tilda began to run back the way we'd come, leaving me struggling to catch up once again. The foliage on the trees turned green, then yellow and red, then back to green. I watched a rabbit cycle through the stages of its life. The height of the grass leaped and dove. The moon and sun battled it out overhead, chasing each other in a rapid game of tag.

In my gawking, I lost sight of Tilda.

I tried to retrace my steps, and before long seemed to reach the edge of the thicket. My phone began to buzz furiously, and as I pulled it out I saw the missed calls pile in and the date spider forth with inhuman speed until I saw that it had been more than half a year since I'd entered.

Looking up, I saw that it was winter. The dense canopy was now sparse and bare, leaving cracks for snowflakes to trickle through.

Tilda was crouched in the snow, shivering in her t-shirt and tattered jeans, her red hair stark against the haze of frost. She was hunting something. The wind howled as a storm started to pick up, transitioning from stray snowflakes to a relentless onslaught of hail.

"Tilda!" I yelled, but my voice was snatched away by the gale.

She pounced, hands wrapped around what looked to be a stray kitten. As I watched, the kitten's matted fur began to change into a lustrous coat, its body elongating, its limbs growing stronger. The now-adult cat started to squirm in Tilda's grip. Its fur withered and grayed, its body deteriorating until nothing was left but brittle bones.

"Tilda?" My voice was much smaller this time, but she spun around, fixing me with a scowl.

"This is because of you!" She shouted over the wind. "If it wasn't an emergency, I wouldn't have to do this." She hurled the bones at me, but as I flinched they dissolved into cascading particles of sand. When they touched my skin, the sand glowed the same color as Tilda's hair. A radiant warmth pulsed through my veins. The world began to glow.

"What did you just do?" I demanded.

"I bought you some time," she replied. "Time that you desperately needed."

"Bought?" Despite myself, I laughed. "You just— *stole* the life of some cat you found."

"What did you want me to do?" Her cheeks were bright red from the cold. "Just sit there and let you die?"

"Die? Who said anything about dying?" I said.

"Ever since I've known you, time has leaked from you like a popped balloon," Tilda said. "You're so preoccupied about the end of time that you're wasting all of yours. I had to do something to keep you alive for a little longer. I'm trying to fix this. "

"And what?" I seethed. "Steal time from *me*?"

Tilda reached out to me. "No, please, you don't understand."

A wobbling vision flashed before my eyes. Tilda and I, surrounded by a haze of tear gas, facing an oncoming line of police in riot gear.

“All those hours you’ve spent with me,” I spat. “You’ve been harvesting my future, and now you give me a cat’s future and expect that to make things okay?”

“Cats are special cases,” she interrupted. “The whole superstition of nine lives, they play with time in weird ways. I didn’t give you a cat’s future. I gave you some of your own future back.”

I scoffed. “Don’t try to distract me. You’re the one who caused the problem.”

“Well, you’re the one who said yes at that stupid wedding,” Tilda retorted. “You said yes, forever and ever. You did the ritual. You tied yourself to me.”

“You tied yourself to *me!*” I yelled back. “I had no idea what the hell I was getting myself into! You’re the daughter of Father Time! Are you even sixteen?”

She made an uncertain gesture.

“Why did *you* say yes to that stupid dare, from that stupid girl, all those stupid years ago?”

Tilda tried to speak, then stopped. Tried again, then stopped again. She swallowed, and took a few breaths.

“Well?” I goaded.

“I guess...I love you.”

My heart lodged in my throat. Warmth washed over me in waves. Tilda made an effort to meet my eyes, waiting for an answer to the confession she’d left dangling in the air between us.

“I—” It was my turn to stutter. “I don’t know what to say.”

How could I find the words to express that I’d loved her since I could remember, that I saw her in my future, that she was my future, the very future that she was stealing from me?

I wrapped my arms around Tilda, and held her as tightly as I could, afraid she would break, afraid she would dissolve into the winter snow.

When we finally pulled away. Tilda’s eyes were teary. With another mustering of courage, she grabbed me by the shirt and leaned in—

“So, this is where all my lost time is?” I said, holding up the Apple Watch. I could feel Tilda’s breath on my lips, taste the disappointment in her words.

“How did you get that?” She let go of me, frantically searching her pockets.

“Your jacket,” I replied, examining the 8-bit hourglass, close to running dry.

“Give it back,” Tilda warned, reaching for it.

“Hey, hey.” I held it out of reach. “I’m just taking back what’s rightfully mine, aren’t I?”

“I’m not kidding, Evren. Give it back,” she insisted.

“You’ve been stealing time from me all these years. Give *that* back,” I snapped.

“Look, I’m sorry,” Tilda pleaded. “I’ll explain. Just give me the hourglass.”

“Fine,” I said. “You want it? Take it.”

She lunged at me, a fraction of a second too slow. I hurled it to the ground, watching with satisfaction as the watch hit the icy ground, splintering into thousands of shards.

A tidal wave of sand poured from the broken watch. I was struck dumb with cosmic disbelief. Had I really wasted *that* much time in my apocalyptic musings?

This sand didn’t glow and dissolve. Instead, it stuck painfully to my skin, cold shards that leached the warmth from my bones. The grains swirled ominously in the air, then began to settle into the contours of legs, a torso, arms, and finally a head. The creature glistened in the moonlight as its features finally came into focus.

It was me. And not me. Its hair was completely white, features etched with deep lines of weariness, shoulders slouched. But it carried an expression I recognized from countless petty arguments with my mom.

I raised my arms uncertainly, balling my hands into fists.

“Really?” the doppelganger scoffed. “That’s what you’re going with?”

“Fight me,” I challenged.

“Ookay,” it rolled its eyes. “But not because you told me to.”

I threw a wild haymaker, and to my surprise, it actually connected. Looking up, I saw my fist embedded in my doppelganger’s face. It held onto my hand like quicksand, gripping me tighter the harder I struggled to extricate myself. I was getting queasy watching my own face swallow my own hand.

“Idiot!” Tilda hissed. “You’re making everything worse!”

I was sucked in all the way to my elbow now. My efforts were only pulling me deeper.

“All that reading, and you still jump straight into Charybdis,” my doppelganger mocked, its voice reverberating around my arm.

I was up to my shoulder now. I thrashed around desperately for something solid to grab onto. As my arm swished around it collided with something. My hand wrapped around its edges, and I recognized my first pencil case, shaped like an ancient sword. I’d gotten laughed at for it, but I still remembered each pouch, each compartment.

Tilda wrapped her arms around my waist and began to pull. “Let go,” Tilda whispered. My hand tightened instinctively around my pencil case. I tugged, but that only sucked me deeper into the doppelganger, until it was halfway around my torso.

“Evren. Let. Go,” Tilda repeated, more urgently this time.

“You heard her,” the doppelganger droned. “Let go.” I could detect the slightest hint of fear in its voice. I knew what his fear sounded like. He was me.

“Give me back my time,” I gritted my teeth and pulled harder.

“*Your* time?” The doppelganger pulsated around me, quivering with indignation. The quicksand was painfully cold around my skin, barbs of ice that held me tight. “Latin verbs, first conjugation,” the doppelganger muttered. “*Amo*. I love. *Amavi*. I loved. *Amabo*. I will love. But I won’t, will I? You memorized that three years, four months, six days and ten hours ago, and you didn’t do anything with it..”

“Wait,” I interrupted nervously, but it forged on.

“Maybe it’s time I take over,” the doppelganger hissed. “*Your* time. *Your* story. I’ve been left to bloat and distend like a tumor as you hoarded knowledge and refused to use it.” I watched as scrawls of Ancient Greek bubbled and popped across its skin.

“What have you done with the things you memorized?” It mocked. “Nothing, beyond reciting them in your head like some nutso, waiting for the world to end. It’s my turn. I have your knowledge, and I’ll do something with it.”

The words roiling across its skin grew faster, more frenzied. The cold shards of sand found their way around my legs, then torso, then arms, then finally my face, muffling my scream as the doppelganger consumed me whole.

I found myself rubbed raw by swirling grains of sand, and bruised from being slammed into an impenetrable glass wall. Was I getting shorter?

“What the hell did you do?” Tilda demanded. The sound reverberated through the glass..

“I took *my* time back,” the doppelganger responded.

I looked around frantically. I wasn’t getting shorter, but there was sand beneath my feet, and it was rapidly pouring through a gaping hole. I was trapped in an hourglass.

Tilda examined the doppelganger warily, taking in its shrinking white patch. She exhaled.

“You beat that thing,” she sighed. “I didn’t know if you were going to make it.”

“Of course I did,” my doppelganger grinned cockily. “Shall we?” It offered an elbow to Tilda, ready to saunter off into the sunset.

“Stop!” I slammed my hand against the glass. The doppelganger feigned ignorance and continued to walk away while I tried to gain purchase on the slippery wall, looking down at the whirlpool that threatened to pull me into oblivion. My sword-shaped pencil case stared at me from the depths.

“Do you want to hear a story?”

The doppelganger’s step faltered, but then it turned around, burning with interest. Tilda gasped when she saw me, but stayed back, curious. I knew what had made him. When I was seven, I’d stopped being myself. After Tilda left, I was ostracized, forced to do anything I could to fit in.

“Do you want to hear a story?” the teacher had called. Normally, I would’ve been the first at her feet, gazing up enraptured at another tale of epic adventure. But that day I’d stayed behind with a group of the popular kids, shoving my pencil case deep into a drawer and apparently, fracturing the course of my life.

“Once upon a time,” I said, my voice strong for once. “There was a hero, stuck on an island for ten long years.”

The doppelganger scoffed. “Some storyteller you are. Stealing from the greats.”

I forged on. “The hero needed a sail to begin his journey home, a sail that would be stronger than any other. He traced every inch of the island, traversing its mountains and valleys, watching its flora and fauna, until he knew the island like the back of his hand. The breath of the fish, the roots of the hills, the sound of rainfall.”

The flow of sand paused, as if it, too, was waiting for the rest of my story.

“After dozens of arduous journeys, he finally held the ingredients that could craft the strongest sail ever seen,” I said.

“And then he made his way home and reunited with his wife,” the doppelganger cut in. “Yadda yadda, old news.”

“No,” I said. “He hoarded the ingredients, stared at their beauty, occasionally went out to forage for more, but never began to craft his sail.”

“What?” the doppelganger shook its head. “That makes zero sense.”

“The hero was so filled with pride at the acquisition of the ingredients that he began to lose sight of what he’d been planning all along,” I continued.

“So... his wife came to get him instead?” the doppelganger scratched its head, glancing at Tilda.

“Nope,” I said. “The hero sat, sat some more, and sat even more. The tide came in and out, the seasons changed, yet all he did was hoard his ingredients. One day, when watching the waves upon the shore, he remembered his father. How they’d weave, knot, and sew, until individual fibers formed a cohesive net.”

“Then upon seeing birds rebuild a nest after a storm, he remembered his mother,” I said. “How they would mend blankets together, using scraps of cloth.”

“Each way he turned, he found a glimpse of his own history in the island,” I sang, my voice gaining traction. “At last, he took out his ingredients and began to combine them, spinning them into thread thinner than ribbon, but stronger than steel.”

“The hero finished weaving his sail, yet found home everywhere he went,” the doppelganger and I finished together.

The doppelganger began to quiver once again, this time with satisfaction. The glass of the hourglass melted away beneath my fingertips. The doppelganger clasped my hand, and I watched as he dissolved into a cloud of auburn light, leaving a swirling pool of sand around my feet.

“You still have a white patch,” Tilda said, pulling a hair from my head.

I grinned. “Maybe it really is genetic.”

She laughed, and I felt like I could spend all the time in the world just watching her eyes crinkle.

I closed the gap and our lips met. I kissed her all the time we'd spent together and separate, for the first time I met her, for the first time she left, and for the knowledge that I'd turn old and grey while she stayed forever young, like Tithonus and Eos. Father Time, in his infinite wisdom, stopped his relentless forward march, granting us a taste of eternity.

Father Time then proceeded to clear his throat from directly behind us.

Tilda and I sprang apart, backpedaling and toppling head-first into the snow. I got to my feet hurriedly, not sure what to do with my hands. I decided to go with a salute. "G'evening, sir."

"Hmph," Father Time grunted. "This guy?"

Tilda colored. "Yes, this guy," she said indignantly.

"Fine," he harrumphed. "I suppose you two have earned a century or so together. But it's back to work after that."

Tilda's face grew redder. "I'm not coming back. I'm going to spend my life with Evren."

I stared at her in disbelief.

"Nonsense," Father Time said. "You have no life. Your days are meant to be spent waiting for your eventual acceptance of my role."

"That's the problem!" she exploded. "Day after day, year after year waiting for some retirement that will never come! When will you stop treating me like a baby and let me *do something*?"

"How can I rest when you're wreaking havoc? Redistributing time, as you see fit. This is not a woman's job. A woman nurtures. A woman raises. A woman protects."

"Nurture, raise, protect," Tilda pulled at her hair. "This isn't a woman's job. This is *your* job. This is *Time's* job, but all you've been doing for decades is the bad part: wearing away, tearing down, and destroying. You grumpy old fart!"

Father Time slammed his scythe down in fury, and I felt the air ossify like melted taffy. Moving and breathing became hard, but I fought my way to Tilda's side and grabbed her hand. She continued to stare defiantly into her father's eyes, but she still gave me a grateful squeeze.

"I renounce my duty," she hissed, eyes blazing. "I reclaim my time, and I will do with it...whatever I want."

Father Time's features were etched with fury, but I thought I could detect a trace of weariness, a longing to set down the sickle and hourglass. "So be it."

He sliced upwards with the scythe, and I felt the fabric of reality split next to my head. The sun and moon rippled in and out of phase. Layers of snow began to disappear, floating back into the atmosphere. The trees bloomed with shades of yellow and red. The numbers on my phone spun rapidly, the missed calls disappearing, the hands on the clock app whirling around and around until we were back to the day we'd left, as if nothing had happened.

Father Time handed Tilda a battered burlap sack, filled to the brim with sand. "Here you are."

Tilda examined it. "A little outdated, don't you think?"

He grumbled some inaudible curses, but with a wave of his hands, the sack melded into Tilda's pants, forming a pocket.

"I have my doubts about this," Father Time said sternly.

"It'll only be for a short while," Tilda coaxed. "It's time you took a vacation."

His features softened, and he pulled Tilda into an embrace. "Perhaps you are right, daughter."

He turned and sauntered off. As he walked into the distance, his robes began to morph into a pair of board shorts and a loud Hawaiian shirt.

"Mom?" I called. "You home?"

She appeared at the door. "What's up?"

“I need to tell you something,” I said nervously.

She narrowed her eyes, her Mom-sense telling her something was off. “Go on.”

And so I told her.

When I’d finished, she raised an eyebrow at me. “Is making up stories your new tactic to get out of school?”

“What? No!” I said. “I’m serious! Tilda’s right here, she’ll tell you.” Tilda ducked into the doorway, giving a shy wave.

“And you’re my all-powerful unofficial daughter-in-law? You look like a sixteen-year-old.” Mom kept her eyebrow raised.

Tilda opened her mouth to speak but decided against it. Instead, she reached into her pocket and scattered a handful of sand, tossing it up into the air so it came cascading down in a sheet. The falling sand glowed with auburn light, and suddenly my vision was filled with an image of Mom singing gently to me as a baby. I recognized with a pang that what she was singing was the *1001 Nights*, each story recrafted and rewoven specifically for me. A satisfied smile played across my sleeping face.

As the sand dissipated, Mom and I made eye contact. Both of our eyes were filled with tears.

“Was that the last time I saw you smile?” Mom asked softly.

“Was that the last time you told me a story?” I asked in response.

“I’m sorry I didn’t finish the epic,” she wiped her nose. “I wish I could have given you the perfect ending that you were always so obsessed with.”

I hugged her, wetting her sweater with my tears.

“Evren. You can learn what you want,” Mom squeezed me tightly. “Do what you want. But perhaps it’s time for you to come back to the land of the living. There’s only so much you can glean from the dusty old men of the past.”

I nodded, swiping at my eyes.

“If he forgets to visit,” she warned Tilda, “I’ll trap you in a magic lamp.”

Tilda, with her never ending supply of magic sand, could finally let time flow. In battlefields strewn with bodies of the injured, hospitals desperately lacking water and power, coastlines ravaged by a new wave of climate disasters, her sand cascaded lovingly and freely. I knelt by the sides of the wounded and the sick, and helped them reapportion their few golden slivers of time. I listened and memorized as they told their stories, weaving them into an epic of my own.

At times, Tilda and I would while away the nights talking about the end of the world. Wherever we went, we felt the inevitable coils of apocalypse tightening around us.

When I looked into her eyes, I could see the same scenes I saw before, but now they had different contexts. Tilda and I shouting triumphantly as the police join the crowd against the government. Us singing to a young girl from a flooded village by the sea, as her people searched for a new homeland. Us celebrating in a lab with a scientist, as she synthesized the first vaccine. Us laying by the side of an injured soldier, telling him stories of the stars.

Finally, maybe, something that looked like the end of the world: the sun and moon swallowed by smog, but still. It wasn’t the end. Our smiles penetrated the darkness, and we kept working. Working, and sailing. Finding home, everywhere we went.