



QCTAVE
OF
STARS
APPETIZER

ZEPHYR
THOMAS

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Preview Copy. The first three chapters of the novel
Version 7: Reruns

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For Resa,
who never got to read this

Episode 01- Pilots & Traditions

"ORDER UP!"

"Where's that salad?"

"Table three is still waiting for their soup!"

The kitchen was a roiling soup unto itself, a whirl of noise and heat. Servers scurried between each station, checking orders, looking for anything they could do to help. The line cook in charge of the ovens studied his workload. Three plates of lasagna, two manicotti, and five calzones, two of which were still on the counter behind him. Another morning keeping people fed and happy. He couldn't claim to be either of those things, however, as he hadn't eaten since before his shift, and he was pretty certain he had just handled a scorching hot dish with his bare hands.

He glanced around him as casually as possible, gray eyes scanning the room while straightening his white restaurant uniform. The nervous urge struck him to run his hand through his short black hair, seasoned with just a few strands of gray. The color was an odd contrast to his youthfulness, even when considering his Hispanic heritage. His skin was light brown and smooth; a small patch of hair adorned his chin, something he was hoping came off as stylish and not silly.

"Ash, more breadsticks," came a voice from behind. Whoever had deposited the tray of soft dough on the counter was gone before he could acknowledge them, so he just picked it up and turned back around. Ash was reasonably sure no one was staring, no one was in awe of what they'd just seen and demanding an explanation. Relaxing with a prayer of thanks, he swapped the tray of raw breadsticks with a finished one. Both of his thick oven gloves were on his hands this time.

The timer on oven three screeched, he quickly slapped it off. A full tray of cannelloni was out and plated.

"Order for fifty-four!" he called to the nearest runner. He warned them that the plate was hot.

Another dozen tickets came and went. Ash focused on each one, making sure cheeses were melted, crusts and breads the correct shade of brown or gold. He also ensured he didn't touch anything above a plausible temperature without protection again. Just a minor hiccup, that was all.

He pulled a stoneware dish of lasagna out of oven number six, and after cutting a section off to be plated, he remembered lasagna should never go in that one. He swore he had put up a note about the faulty element, but it was nowhere to be seen. One side of the portion definitely didn't look as scrumptious as it should.

Ash grabbed the infrared thermometer from his apron pocket for deniability. Twenty degrees under spec. He turned back to the ovens; placing that portion in by itself meant the cheese would burn. By the time an entire tray was done, he would have a server glaring at him. There weren't any others that were even close. Decision time.

Ash put the larger dish back in a better oven. He picked up the smaller plate and turned his back to the kitchen to make it look like he was still debating. Cupping his hand around the food, he warmed it up as gently as possible, rotating the plate slowly until it was evenly broiled on all sides. Unless the customer was some kind of food critic, it would be just fine.

He set the plate down and called for the order, then ducked under the counter for the ice pack he kept there. His palm might have scalded anything he touched, but the cloth-covered pack brought it down to a much more manageable level. He would have to get another one from the freezer later.

"Hey, Ash," a voice called from above. He straightened up to find a youngish blond kid holding his own set of oven gloves. "Jack wants to see you, he's in the office. I'll take over here."

"Huh." Ash glanced at the large digital clock on the wall, then frowned. "Alright, here you go." He relayed a quick snapshot of the status at that station.

His coworker nodded along. "Oh, and I saw your girlfriend out front too."

Ash's concerned eyes softened. "Got it. Thanks Chuck."

Chuck pulled on his gloves. "How many times... It's Charlie, man."

"Well, since you keep calling her my girlfriend, I'm gonna keep calling you Chuck." Ash left his gloves under the counter, casually pocketing the ice pack. "We're just friends."

"Fine, Chuck it is." Ash smiled and turned toward the office, but Charlie wasn't done yet. "That's how it always starts out, you know."

Ash wanted to yell back something smug, but nothing came to mind. Chuck had no idea what he was talking about.

Framed newspaper clippings lined the walls of the business office, alongside a few autographed menus by local celebrities. The man sitting at the crowded desk was nearly bald, all the hair on his head having migrated to his long mustache. He looked up from a sheet of paper as Ash knocked on the door frame.

"You wanted to see me?" Ash forced his voice to stay steady.

"Yes, Ash, come in." Jack gestured to the large leather chair on the other side of the desk, leaning back in his own cloth swiveling chair. "So..." He took one last look at the sheet before setting it down. "I'm not really sure how to say this."

Ash gripped the wooden arms of the chair to keep his inner fire under control. He'd been seen, now came the questions, or if he was lucky, he would just get fired and he could move on quietly—

"Your shift will have to end a little early," Jack said. "I just don't have enough hours to let you work the rest of the day."

"Oh, okay," Ash said automatically.

"But please," Jack continued, twisting in the chair's seat as he spoke. "Don't get me wrong. This isn't a reflection of your ability. You're one of the best employees I've got, so I need to have you working at the best possible time."

Ash nodded. He could tell Jack was trying to minimize the blow by assuaging his ego, but he was so relieved he let him continue. The rest of the conversation was just pleasantries and assurances, and Ash was on his way before he knew it.

Walking back through the kitchen, he saw Chuck arguing about a rejected dish with a server, and remembered something else he had to look forward to.

Shrugging off his white outer uniform, he dropped it in the bin to get laundered. By the next shift, it would have joined its brethren in the men's large size box, neatly folded and ready for action. Without it, night fell on his outfit: black shirt, slacks, and shoes, even his socks, although hardly anyone noticed. He clocked out using the fancy new computer time system, the one that always acted up and required them to fill out a card anyway. That day, it decided to be

merciful.

Although she was definitely not his girlfriend, 'girl' was not the right word to describe the young woman seated at a table by the large front window. With her back to him, the long braid of coppery hair stood out against her blue hooded sweatshirt. She had set out a book of crossword puzzles next to her personal notebook, but both sat forgotten as she stared out the window.

Ash sat down across from her. "Hey Cas."

Her attention came away from the people, and with it, her sea-blue eyes. "Hey you," she said contentedly. "How much time do you have on your lunch?"

"Well, a lot I guess." He relaxed his shoulders, burning through the remaining stress. "I'm kinda done for the day."

She narrowed her eyes. "Oh, I see. I take it that's not a good thing?"

"Not so much." Ash sighed, then straightened up. "I am hungry, though. Did you order anything? I can go grab something really quick."

"I did, actually." She laid a finger against her freckled cheek, her eyes brightening. "And... I think it's here now. Thank you!" She called thanks over Ash's shoulder.

Ash turned to see the brunette waitress with a long ponytail, carrying a large plate in each hand. "No problem, Cascadia," she said, setting down a plate in front of each patron. "If you need anything else, come find me, I have a big table to get cleared."

"Okay," Ash said, "thanks Jenna."

Ash looked back at his dish piled high with seafood and pasta, then at his friend. "Cas, this is one of the most expensive things on the menu. And it's not burned, so it had to be full price. What's the occasion?"

"Surprise!" Cascadia said, pulling out a sheet from her notebook and sliding it across the table to him.

Dear Miss Dewlenser,

We have decided to accept your short story "Crisis of Faith" for publication in the next issue. Please find enclosed a check for your compensation...

"Wow, congratulations!"

"Thank you," Cascadia said, bowing from her seat. "I thought this was worth a celebration, so I wanted to get a little something for the both of us."

"I'm not sure this counts as a little something... but I'll take it. Ready?" He held his fingertips up to his forehead. She nodded. They both made the Sign of the Cross and said Grace, Ash kissing his fingertips at the end of the prayer. Cascadia had ordered herself an extravagant dish of fancy cheesy pasta and vegetables roasted with oil and herbs.

Two glasses of ice water sat in the middle of the table, both full. Ash picked one up and slaked the thirst he had worked up, then raised it to Cascadia. "A toast?"

Cascadia noticed her glass for the first time. "Oh, of course." She picked it up, and they tapped them together, then she took a few sips.

Satisfied, Ash took to his meal, savoring every mouthful of the shrimp and clams he rarely got to eat. "This is good," he said, after swallowing a bite. "The garlic in the Alfredo sauce gets roasted here, it helps the flavor stay strong."

She gave him a satisfied smile. "I'm glad you enjoy it."

He nodded. There was plenty to enjoy, even in the face of disappointment. "So, how was class today?" He cracked open a clam with his fork and spoon.

"Oh, it was Monday." Her exuberant tone dimmed. "Economics and chemistry 101. The most boring classes I think I've ever had. I haven't found anything exciting in either of them. The chemistry lab, sure, that's fun." She held her fork sideways above her plate. "Especially when we get liquids that have no water in them. Those are fun to work with. Did you know that almost all liquid chemicals are odorless and colorless?"

"Huh."

"I think it's funny," she continued. "It's like they're pretending to be water, they feel left out. But other than that, it's boring. Why is science part of an English degree anyhow?"

Ash chuckled. "To make sure you know how awful being a scientist would be."

"Like I need a reminder of that."

They chatted about assorted topics; what they needed to pick up from the bodega around the corner, whether she had ever heard back from the landlord about getting a cat, and what to do with the upcoming weekend, even though the previous one had just ended.

Ash pushed away his plate and started tidying the table. "Well, since you're going home, I guess I'm coming with you."

Cascadia crumpled up her napkin and set it on the table. "You won't hear me complaining about that." As she stood from the table, her long brown skirt fell around her legs. She gathered the rest of her things into her sling bag while Ash busied the table, then got his backpack from the coat hook near the back. Full and content and together, they stepped out onto the sidewalk.

THE DOWNTOWN sidewalks were lined with potted shrubbery and dotted with trees, just beginning to show little buds of life in the early season. Cascadia tried to examine each car that drove by, glancing in the windows at the inhabitants. When someone's face struck her fancy, she scribbled down the details on her memo pad, the kind with a plastic cover and waterproof pages.

Ash examined the greenery and the patchy white clouds in the sky. "I'm glad this winter was a mild one. It's already spring, that much closer to summer."

"I'm not," Cascadia said, her attention still on the cars. "It's so beautiful when the streets are coated in snow and the windows are rimed with ice."

"Umm... 'window' doesn't rhyme with 'ice'."

She glanced back at him, a playful expression on her face. "No, not r-h-y-m-e, r-i-m-e. Rime is a deposit of ice crystals on a surface. To be rimed is to be lightly covered with ice."

"Got it," he said. "I see you're enjoying the dictionary you got for your birthday."

"Maybe I am."

The yellow lighted letters on the front of the bus advertised their destination. Ash waited to see if the white-haired lady they had been waiting with needed any help up the steps, but she could handle it on her own. Cascadia went next, showing the driver her university student pass, followed by Ash with his prepaid monthly pass.

Cascadia settled by the window, cradling her bag in her lap, as the bus set off for its next stop. Ash positioned his pack at his feet and got comfortable, sitting slightly to the side so their knees didn't touch.

She said a prayer of gratitude for their little habits like this. This part of the city was definitely not what someone would label as 'inner,' but that same proverbial someone would still encounter unsavory elements if given enough

time. She was glad she could just relax and enjoy the ride, since Ash was vigilant enough for the both of them.

"Hey, I have an idea," Cascadia said. "Why don't we get off at the thrift store, I thought you said you wanted to look for clothes?"

"I did..." Ash looked from the window to her grinning face. "Let me guess, it's orange sticker day."

"It is!"

Ash groaned. "Please only paperbacks this time, hardcovers are so heavy."

"Come on, books are good for you. You build brain muscles and arm muscles at the same time. Although that would require you to actually read them." She leveled a finger at him. They both adjusted their balance as the bus smoothly turned around a corner.

"Hey, I read cookbooks."

She frowned. "I don't think lists of ingredients and directions count as literature."

"What about in the introductions, when the chef talks about the history of the food and where it came from?"

"Alright, fair enough." She nodded. "I'll give you that much."

"Good." They turned back to their stations, hers out the window and his toward the front of the bus, their expressions of annoyance soon turning into carefree grins.

Ash's phone buzzed. He pulled it from his pocket and flipped it open. After responding, he sat staring at it a moment longer than usual.

"Who was it?" she asked tentatively.

"It's from Óscar Mario. He heard about an opening at a new restaurant."

"That sounds interesting."

"Yeah, I'd have to check the bus routes first, though."

Ash pushed aside the decision-making for now and picked up the text exchange about the last fútbol game they had watched together. He was so absorbed, he didn't notice that they were approaching their goal until Cascadia pulled the cable on the wall to signal the driver.

The expansive treasure hunt that was the local thrift store never ceased to enthrall Cascadia and intrigue Ash. It was the type which accepted any sort of item for resale, so one side of the building was dedicated to clothing, another to

gently used furniture, and another to housewares and decor. Most of the things on the shelves and racks were old and many were odd, but it was always attractive to two budget-conscious, discerning shoppers.

Cascadia immediately went for a shopping cart, but Ash's exasperated look made her pick up a hand basket instead. She plunged headfirst into the aisles of books, while he had a go at the clothing section. He didn't always find shirts in his size which didn't also have holes in them, but when he did, the price made the expedition worthwhile.

Ash tuned out the popular music blaring overhead as he navigated the racks of shirts, ignoring the ones with pithy sayings printed on the front. After finding a dark gray button-up shirt, he walked past the accessories on the way to the front. Noticing the baseball caps, he briefly considered one with a red stripe on the top of the brow and a white one on the bottom, but decided against it. It didn't really fit his image.

After checking out, and contributing to the positive environmental impact which was announced on the overhead speakers every so often, he folded his purchases into his backpack, then walked the shelves of books to find his wayward companion.

Around the corner, he found her headed in his direction, holding the basket in front, with her eyes on the bookshelves instead of the aisle. After another step, she saw something out of her side vision and pulled up short, letting out a tiny yelp.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Cascadia said automatically, her basket inches from him. "Oh, it's just you." She pushed the basket forward to bump against him. "You'll never believe what I found." She gestured with her free hand to the spoils of her efforts. "They had the *entire series*, all the same edition, and in really good shape. I'm so excited!"

Ash examined the spines. "But you already have the first three."

She shrugged. "I'll donate them, that way they'll all match."

"Hey, it's your bookshelf space."

Cascadia made a pained expression as they walked toward the registers. "Probably floor space by now. So Ash..." she said imploringly. "Would you be willing to carry half of them and I can carry the others? Or we can do sixty-forty."

He counted the books again. "I don't think you wanna cut one of them in half."

She screwed up her face. "Rounded up then?"

Ash pretended to consider a moment. "Sure, I'll take half."

A FLOCK of pigeons took to the wing as the bus let out a pneumatic hiss, slowly rolling away from the curb and into traffic. Ash adjusted the straps on his pack, feeling the extra weight of the books. He could have carried them all easily, but that would have only emboldened her further. The memory of the last time they had done this came back to him, the serious concern in her voice: *But if I only get a few at a time, someone else might buy the rest!*

The final leg of their journey required them to cross a large paved plaza that spanned the entire block, from the bus stop to the parallel street opposite. Cascadia never thought of it as a requirement, though. Rather than *having* to cross the plaza, she saw it as *getting* to cross.

The center of the space was given over to an enormous round fountain, with ornately decorated stone spouts in the shapes of fishes and other sea creatures, the concrete ring wide enough to sit and enjoy the view. Cascadia wanted to do just that, but first she used the outer screen of her dark blue phone to check the time.

"We're on time," she said to Ash, as they walked away from the bus stop. "We'll get a good seat for sure." She turned off the phone's ringtone.

He chuckled while doing the same. "We always get a good seat."

Across from the fountain was the back entrance to the chapel of the parish church that took up the northern part of the block. The exterior of the building was stone, carved with similar aquatic patterns as the fountain, owing to the church's designation as Star of the Sea. The statue of the Virgin Mary stood watchful over the double doorway, her hands outstretched in prayer atop carved ocean waves. Cascadia kept her hand on the stair rail so she could keep her eyes on the statue. She had always felt particularly close to this representation of the Blessed Mother, a calmer of storms and refuge for the troubled.

Ash opened the door that squeaked the least and waited for Cascadia to enter. She pulled her bag around her waist to access the white lace veil she kept there, draping it over her red hair and pinning the corners underneath her braid. Ash made sure the door closed softly to not disturb the peaceful atmosphere inside. He went to the Holy Water font, then stood in silence while she finished preparing.

Cascadia approached the font and dipped her finger in. She was so lost in thought, she obtained not a drop of blessed liquid, but the entire contents of the bowl, attached to her finger in an undulating bubble. "Oops," she whispered,

before setting it back inside as gently as she could with an amorphous handful of water. She forced it to settle down again.

The panic swelled within her until she remembered this was daily Mass, not Sunday; the only other people around were the old Filipino ladies who practically lived in the front pews, and a handful of retirees and other folks who had the time to attend the sacrament in the middle of the afternoon. On top of that, almost all of them had their eyes fixed forward; the altar with the tabernacle behind it and the carved wooden crucifix above. Ash had noticed, but he gave her a confident smile and a nod. She nodded back.

They chose a pew in the middle and kneeled side by side. The chapel was small but not simple, with wood paneling on the walls and a large chandelier with a dozen light bulbs fashioned to look like candles.

Ash offered prayers for his parents, his brothers, his cousins, uncles, and aunts. It was quite the list, but there hadn't been any baptisms in a few years, so he had gotten good at reciting the current lineup. He prayed he would find a better job, since that was clearly what he needed to do. He also prayed for Cascadia, that she would do well in school and be successful in her endeavors.

Cascadia prayed for her small family: her parents, and brother, and the aunt she knew had gone into the hospital recently. She prayed for her friends from school and her comrades in her writing group. She asked for continued inspiration in her writing, so she could be a reflection of His will in the world through her words. And of course, she couldn't forget the man beside her, that he would have the wisdom to know God's will and the courage to do it.

The bell beside the altar rang. They stood up as the priest entered, adorned in his green vestments to say the opening prayers. There was no choir, no music, just the priest and the black-haired homeschool mother who presided at the ambo for the readings, her squadron of children in the front pew kept in line by the oldest girls.

The Old Testament reading was one of the prophets foretelling doom, but also the possible reconciliation of God's people if they turned back toward him. Ash always felt a connection with these passages because of his similar journey in life.

After the Gospel, the priest remained at the ambo and gave his homily. He was nearly bald, with round glasses and a rounder face, and always had a contented smile. He told a story about how the ancient translators of the Bible took the Virgin Mary's Hebrew name and translated it into Greek, which in Latin

became 'stilla maris', or 'drop of the sea.' An error by a copyist turned it into 'stella maris,' or Star of the Sea. His point was, despite these human errors, nothing happens by accident with God. He makes no mistakes; even if His works don't make sense, or appear to be errors to us, they are still part of His plan.

Cascadia resonated with this concept, having frequently wondered what God's design for her truly was. Clearly, she was meant to be an author; she had been honing that talent since she was young. But how did her other talents fit into God's plan? She prayed again she could be useful to Him, when and where she was needed.

The consecration began, and they kneeled during the silent raising of the host. Ash opened his hands, inviting reception of the upcoming sacrament. He prayed he would have a place at the Supper of the Lamb, to partake in the rich foods of the feast. When the priest raised the chalice, Cascadia imagined the choice wines and the wedding at Cana. An overflow of mercy, refreshment for all.

They filed up for Communion one by one, Cascadia making sure her veil was still in place. Ash was in front, receiving in the hand, recalling the words of Jesus in Luke 12. He came to set the Earth on fire, and Ash was definitely already blazing. As he consumed the sacrament, he accepted Jesus' fire into his own.

Cascadia received the Body on the tongue, then turned to the homeschool mother who held the chalice. She took a sip of the Precious Blood, tasting the sourness and sweetness. She reflected on the dual natures of the wine, in more than one manner. Contradictory natures combined into one thing. Complementary attributes that worked together. Divine sacraments in a tangible object. She watched Ash as they walked back to their pew, musing on how this duality pertained to the two of them as well.

The Communion line was finished by the time they settled back on their kneelers. Father called them to rise for the last prayer and blessing. Once he had recessed back into the sacristy through the same door he had entered from, Ash and Cascadia sat down to finish their prayers.

It wasn't quite four o'clock, according to Ash's watch, so he leaned back and tapped Cascadia on the shoulder, showing her his rosary, a complicated string of knotted paracord. She nodded, then sat herself and procured her own, a delicate one made from blue glass beads and silver wire. They made the Sign of the Cross, then began the Chaplet of Divine Mercy in silent union.

Ash tried to keep his fidgeting to a minimum, bouncing his leg and shifting

around when he felt uncomfortable. He closed his eyes to focus, but his attention was inevitably drawn to some sound or another around him. Cascadia didn't have any trouble sitting still, in fact, she enjoyed it. She clasped her hands in her lap and moved her rosary through her fingers with a look of peace on her face.

To keep himself still, Ash reached under his collar and pulled out his scapular, to feel the small square of rough brown wool on his fingers. Tied to the string were other images of saints embroidered on wool squares, like small scapulars themselves. He went through them, asking for intercession from each in turn. The image of the Miraculous Medal, the Divine Mercy, the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Saint Dominic, and Saint Lawrence. Ash recalled the discussion he and Cascadia had years ago about this last holy individual. When choosing his entourage of patron saints, he had initially picked Saint Florian, because of his association with fire, only to learn he was actually the patron of firefighters. Instead, he gave the image to Cascadia, who seemed better suited for it, and picked Saint Lawrence instead.

As with all things, their time in the presence of God came to an end. Ash and Cascadia rose quietly from their seats, then genuflected and left the chapel, nodding to the remaining faithful they recognized. Cascadia took off her veil, grateful she had left the water in the font in its proper place this time.

Outside, the two young adults headed down the steps and toward their homes, which led them past the fountain. Each fish and seahorse emitted a stream of water from their stone mouths. Cascadia approached the edge, peering into the water to see her blue eyes reflected back, and Ash's gray ones as he came up beside her. She enjoyed the scintillating collection of coins that coated the bottom, sunken treasure to be pulled out of the depths, but not in full view of everyone outside. That would be, as she liked to put it, unwise.

IT WAS only a short walk across the rest of the plaza to the place they both called home, a long and wide brick building. They went up the stairway to the front entrance, Ash once again holding the door for her. The decor of the lobby and hallways hadn't been updated in decades, flat green carpet and fake plants along each wall. Charming little paintings hung between the windows that faced the courtyards and let in some of the afternoon sun.

Cascadia stepped up to one door in the third-floor hallway and pulled out a

blue enameled key. Ash walked a dozen paces farther to the next door and took out his, a plain metal one.

"Welcome home," Cascadia called, and they each entered their respective spaces.

Ash's apartment was a modest studio, a single room with the only other door leading to the small bathroom. He unloaded his gear at the table in the middle of the room; backpack, jacket and shoes, stacking the books he'd been carrying neatly. The corner by the window served as the kitchen, a refrigerator, stove, and sink lined up with short lengths of countertop between. He closed the blinds before opening the refrigerator and taking inventory. It had been a few hours since he had eaten at the restaurant, but it was still a little early for dinner. It looked like he needed to make more coffee for tomorrow, though.

A cupful of beans went through the hand-cranked grinder, the grounds soaked in a repurposed glass jar full of water and stored in the fridge to brew overnight. This final work done, he dropped onto the fabric loveseat in the middle of the room, one arm over the back and the other flipping open his phone. Framed on the wall above the bed was a picture frame with not a photo, but a piece of calligraphy, writing as art: 'Isaiah 43:2.'

Right on cue, he heard a specific pattern of knocks from the hallway door. "Come in," he called, and Cascadia unlocked the door and did just that, going straight to the table.

"I'll be right back," she said, "I just want to put these with their friends, so they don't get lonely."

At dinnertime, he had company over. Cascadia had spread out books across the table, some printed and some waiting to receive print. Ash assembled the supplies for his own kind of artwork on the countertop. He tied the strings of his apron, the red one she had bought for him with a cartoon of a barbecue grill with flames issuing forth from the top. He placed the oiled wok on the stove, then reached below it. With one hand, he turned on the gas, and with the other he snapped his fingers, the burner flaring to life.

Cascadia glanced up from her readings. "Are you ever going to get that fixed?"

He shrugged. "I'll tell them when I move out. Anyway, this cooking has begun."

"Thirty minutes remaining," she intoned.

"Good thing I only have one dish to prepare."

She put her elbow on the table and propped her head in her hand, the pen still in her fingers. "So what's on the menu tonight, chef?"

"I thought I'd do a simple stir-fry, rice noodles with a little bit of oil," he added ingredients to the wok as he spoke, "with broccoli, carrots and onion, and pressed, frozen tofu for our vegetarian judge. I'll add chicken with chili sauce for the chef later."

Cascadia put on a high falsetto voice. "Oh, that sounds wonderful, I've never had anything like it."

He smiled, but kept his focus. "Now we'll hit it with some powdered garlic, to let it really infuse the oil. That's gonna add a lot of flavor."

She left him to his work, intending to finish at least part of her own by tonight. She had been struggling all afternoon, trying to figure out what sort of themes and meanings she could glean from the assigned readings. Instead of archetypes and connections, her notes were mostly full of ideas for her next story.

Once fifteen minutes had elapsed, she sighed. "I wonder if my 'A' in creative writing would help to cancel out a 'D' in English literature."

Ash stirred the contents of the wok with large chopsticks. "Do you have a 'D'?"

"Well no, but I will when I give up on this assignment."

He opened the burner. "That sounds like a... what did you call it? A fatalistic world view?"

"Maybe you're right. I should at least try, even though I am doomed to failure."

"Hey, what happened to the celebration earlier today?" He turned away from the stove for a moment, leveling the chopsticks at her. "You sold a story, that's hardly 'doomed to failure'."

"You're right, I did do that." She closed the largest book, before realizing she hadn't marked her place, and frowned. She got up and stretched, pushing her pale red braid over her shoulder. "That smells amazing, is there anything I can do to help?"

Ash added one more dash of chili sauce to the chicken searing away in the smaller cast-iron pan. "Nope, almost done. You could set the table if you're done too."

"Absolutely," she went to the single narrow cabinet, the top half of shelves holding dry goods and the bottom, tableware. She was to his right, with the open door between them, so she couldn't see whatever caused him to let out an exclamation.

Ash had spilled a bit too much oil out of the pan and it landed on the burner, flaring up with an impressive force. He expertly set down the food and killed the gas, but instead of reaching for a pot lid or the baking soda, he put his hand above the flame and pushed down slowly. The raging flames shivered and shrank, until he reached an agreement with them and slapped his hand directly down on the still-hot burner, the fire completely out.

Cascadia peeked around the protective door, a small bubble of water between her fingertips. "Need some help?"

"That wouldn't stop a grease fire..." He made sure the other burners were off while wiping up the excess oil. "I think this challenge is over, though."

She dropped the bubble in the sink, then picked up two plates decorated with blue and white flowers. "I'm glad you haven't had to do that at work yet."

Ash gave her a smirk. "No, not yet. Right now the worst I can do is forget to burn myself."

Cascadia cleared and set the table, while Ash cleaned up the stove. Next up was tasting and scoring, but she was going to eat the whole thing and would have given it a perfect score if asked.

After dinner, it was time for Ash to return the favor and pay his neighbor a visit. Cascadia's apartment was a mirror image of Ash's. Her kitchen was to the left of the front door, although about the only action one could take there was boiling water in the teakettle; nearly every other piece of kitchen equipment had been contributed to Ash's cooking studio. The two-person table was nearby, perfect for early morning coffee and tea while gazing out the window. If one could find a place to set their mug between the stacks of books and papers.

The corner of the studio was shared territory: Ash's television sat on a low table, dusted and neat, beside Cascadia's computer desk, strewn with pens and assignments. The rest was all hers; the bookshelf packed to capacity, the bed piled high with pillows and quilts, the sections of floor containing the perpetual overflow of the bookcase.

Ash stretched out on the floral print couch for his evening vigil of the cooking

channel. *Hotdog Wars* was about to finish, and he sat up to check the channel guide booklet and what to expect next.

"Ugh, not *Cupcake Fancier*, I hate that show. *Italian Destinations* isn't on until later."

Cascadia sat in front of her computer, an enormous desktop model that whirred almost as loudly as the television. The rhythmic clack of the keyboard ceased. Leaning back in her chair, she glanced at the top of the desk, where the framed words 'Isaiah 43:2' stood in their frame. "You know, I just got an awesome book series. As compensation for helping me carry them, I'll let you read them if you want."

"That's generous of you," he replied while flipping through the local channels. "Here's the news, I wanna see if we need to pack umbrellas tomorrow. I heard it was going to rain in the next week."

"I can see the weather online," she said, clicking toward the information as she spoke.

"Yeah, but you're supposed to be studying. Why are you even talking to me right now?"

She looked at the larger of the two clocks on her wall, a fancy model with a decorated face and scrollwork hands. "Good point."

Ash restored the sound and watched a report on firefighters rescuing a family of ducklings from a storm drain, then the predictions for the next university football game. It wasn't until after this that something caught Cascadia's attention.

"...Earlier today, energy conglomerate Frost Enterprises called a press conference to reveal an important new announcement..."

"Oh, I have *got* to see this," she said, turning around in her chair.

"Didn't you do a report on them for your environment class?"

"Yup. Oil drilling, hydro fracturing, coal mining, they're about as bad as it gets."

The news segment changed to a podium emblazoned with a stylized blue and black 'F', which appeared more like a stone tower than a letter. Standing behind the podium was an elderly gentleman, wearing an immaculate black suit, the same color as his combed-back dark hair, and sporting a gray beard and moustache. Standing behind him were two equally well-dressed fellows, a slim man of East Asian descent with a permanent smirk, and an imposing African-American. The gentleman spoke, his British accent unmistakable.

"We have a commitment as stewards of this planet. Whatever philosophy you ascribe to, this world was not made by our hands, and we cannot treat it as some expendable plaything. With that, we are announcing a new initiative at Frost Enterprises. While we have made some forays into cleaner energy, I am committing, as of this moment forward, that we will cease all development of new projects involving coal and petroleum, and manoeuvre toward investing totally in solar, wind, and other types of energies."

The applause of the assembled reporters was preempted by the news anchor. "Over the past six months, company stocks had taken a downturn following reports of sabotage at key facilities by so-called vigilante eco-terrorists. Official statements by the company denied this, citing infrastructure failures instead. Regardless, analysts are predicting today's announcement will result in a positive effect on stocks..."

Cascadia's mood enjoyed no positive effects. "Something is fishy here," she said at last, her brow furrowed. "Eighty-seven percent of their revenue comes from oil and gas, why would they just give that up?" She waved a hand in irritation. "Also, what does 'other types of energy' mean? Why don't they just come out and say it?"

"Maybe he doesn't know," Ash pointed out. "Maybe no one has told him yet."

"This whole thing is ridiculous." She perched on the edge of her chair like a bird of prey, her arms and legs crossed. "They can't just undo all the damage they've already done with a bunch of solar panels and windmills."

"Well, at least they're trying, right? They know what they're doing isn't working and want to try to fix it?"

Cascadia's indignation rose inside her. It was just another feature of her unpredictable heart, one moment she was a placid sea, the next was anything but. "Are you defending them? A company that's destroyed thousands of square miles of animal habitats and dumped who knows what into the oceans?"

Ash stood his ground, the challenge sparking the embers of his own heart, even though his competitor was her. "No, I'm just coming at it from the other side. No one is truly bad, right? Everyone deserves a chance to do right, even if they're 'as bad as it gets'?"

She visibly relaxed, her shoulders loosening despite her rolling eyes. "Okay, you're right." Her inner waves were calming. "I don't know why I'm yelling about this anyway, I already turned in that paper last semester." She shook her head to

clear it, then checked the clocks again. The smaller one, hung lower, was set six hours ahead of the local time. "Ugh, I've got to finish this by tonight. No more distractions!" She whirled around again.

Ash grinned at the back of her head while the weather report came on. Indeed, it was supposed to rain by the weekend.

The television chef wrapped up their culinary lesson just as Cascadia closed her book and switched off the computer monitor. "That's all for tonight, thank goodness." She stretched, coming back to the current space and time. "Wait, did we already pray the Rosary, in the chapel?"

Ash turned off the television. "No, we prayed the Chaplet. We should do it before I head home, though."

"Good idea," Cascadia said, pulling her wire and glass rosary out of her skirt pocket. "It's such a long journey, you need to be fortified spiritually before undertaking it."

Ash moved over to the corner of the couch and she occupied the other, as they completed their devotions, and the day.

Episode 02- Warm & Cool

"NO, BLAISE, don't!" Cecilia yelled over the sound of the rushing waterfall. "You can't go down there, you'll drown!"

"I have to do this," Blaise called back, the water already splashing over his arms and sending up clouds of mist. "You hold off the giants while I cross the ruined bridge to Eden. We have to get the flaming sword from the angel to defeat Wizard Gemnon!"

"No, you can't do it," she cried, the mist soaking through her long black hair. "It's too dangerous!"

"I know," he said, his voice full of determination. "But that is why I must try." He burned the surrounding air in a blazing halo and dove under the water, steam pouring out from the river.

"No..." she said softly, the tears starting to fall from her eyes. The pack of giants was getting closer, but they didn't know what they were about to stumble upon. Because for Cecilia, even her tears were potent weapons...

Cascadia frowned down at the paper. Okay, dramatic cliffhanger, yes, but kind of cheesy. It needed something else. She looked up from her notebook and out the windows, at the branches of the newly budding trees swaying in the slight breeze.

The lecture hall was full of students, most of whom were diligently listening to the professor's words and taking notes. Cascadia was unfortunately not in that group. She set down her pen and rubbed her face with her fingertips, attempting to focus on where she was and what she was supposed to be doing. Higher education, yes. Continuing the next chapter of her story, probably not.

The sun was shining through the windows at the back of the hall, illuminating the flower pattern on her green skirt and her favorite blue hooded sweatshirt. Her attention was drawn back to the projector screen at the front of the room, where the professor had laid out a sheet with the details of the next lesson. The topic of the day in her psychology class was the perception of truth, and how it can be influenced by certain factors, such as authoritative evidence and peer corroboration. The professor would show the class several pictures that were real and verifiable, and others that had been doctored either through photographic tricks or computer editing. They were to vote on which were true and which were fiction, and at the end, she would reveal the actual results.

The first image elicited some chuckles from the class. It depicted a rabbit standing in the middle of a desert landscape, except that a pair of antlers sprouted from its head. Cascadia picked up the voting controller from the arm of her seat and pushed 'B', definitely fake. The next was a large leafless tree, also in an arid scene, except that a herd of goats were standing in the top branches. After recalling that goats were in fact adept climbers, she selected truth.

The third picture didn't cause her to chuckle. It was a photograph taken in a suburban area, of a raised swimming pool in a backyard. The picture showed a young girl standing on the surface of the water, the tops of her feet just visible. A confusing sense of dissonance struck Cascadia like a sudden wave. Had someone surreptitiously photographed one of her escapades when first learning about her powers? Were They watching her?

Her mind took over and settled down her turbulent heart. The girl in the picture definitely was not her; she had never worn her hair like that, and it was entirely the wrong color. The boards that supported the girl above the water were visible, especially to a self-certified expert in looking at things underwater. She breathed a sigh of relief and chose falsehood, after glancing around to see if anyone had noticed her momentary fear.

Cascadia walked up the exterior stairs to the library, still a little shaken after the last class. She dimly noticed the whirring of the automatic doors, the chatter of students at the tables in the entryway. The girl at the front desk talking with a patron looked familiar; she tried to remember which class she'd been in. Opposite the desk were rows of student computers, so the librarians could keep tabs and make sure resources were being used for educational purposes only. She found

the table she wanted near the hallway to Special Collections.

The young woman seated there had dark blonde hair curled into ringlets on her back and fair skin. She wore a simple yellow sweater and loose jeans, and had no make-up or other adornment like most other ladies her age. The only jewelry she wore was a brown scapular on the outside of her clothing. An open book was on the table in front of her, and she slowly passed her fingers across each page. A golden retriever sat under the table with a harness on its back, the handle of which rested near her elbow. The dog wagged its tail as Cascadia approached, thumping against the floor, causing the woman to stop reading and turn her head slowly around.

"Hello there, friend," she said.

"Hello Gabrielle," Cascadia said, walking up to stand beside her. "Can I pet Edward?"

"Yes Cascadia, he's been quite calm this morning," she answered, and Cascadia knelt to scratch the placid dog behind his ears.

Cascadia sat down on the opposite side of Edward, so he wouldn't expect any more attention. He let out a sigh and laid back down. "How was your weekend?" Cascadia began, pulling her bag over her head and unzipping it on the table. "I haven't seen you in a while. Oh, how was the concert?"

"It was wonderful. Absolutely stunning. The group this year is terribly skilled."

"That does sound great, I'm sad I didn't get to go."

"Hmm, I believe they'll be holding another one next month, if I recall correctly. We could go together, the three of us." Her face lit up at this idea.

Cascadia smiled as well. "Yeah, that sounds great. I'll see if I can find the schedule."

"And what about you, Cascadia? How has the Lord been treating you lately?"

"Well..." She recalled the past few days: stopping at the thrift store on the way home yesterday, Mass two days in a row, then an exciting point sprang into her mind. "Oh, I got a letter back from the magazine, and they accepted it!" She reached into her notebook for the letter, but stopped.

Gabrielle smiled widely and warmly. "That's fantastic! I'm so glad for you." She made the Sign of the Cross, then clasped her hands in front of her and closed her eyes. "Thank you, Lord, for your blessings upon Cascadia. You have given her a wonderful gift, please help her use that gift for your glory. Amen."

Cascadia's hands remained clasped as she pondered the double meaning of Gabrielle's words. God had indeed given her a wonderful gift, but it wasn't the one she had been talking about that had the most impact in Cascadia's life.

Gabrielle continued to look toward her. "Forgive me if I don't recall correctly, but was that your first accepted submission?"

She thought for a second. "Yes, well, at least my first recent one. I was in a kid's literary magazine in grade school, but my teacher coordinated that one."

"Congratulations then. I hope it was fulfilling for you."

"It was," she said, getting her focus off of her primary gift and back to her secondary one. "I've wanted to be published since I was a little kid, so this is just the first step in the journey."

"Indeed. My offer still stands, you know. I would love to listen to any material you have, provided that you can make your own annotations."

"I think I'd like that," Cascadia said. "I typed up a few more pages over the weekend, but I didn't print them out. Next week I'll try to bring in what I have."

"Excellent, it's a date then." Cascadia pulled out her pocket planner and jotted down the reminder.

"So how about you," Cascadia asked. "Do you need anything right now? Can I grab any books for you?"

"That's very kind of you," Gabrielle answered. "But I believe I'm alright."

"Okay," she said, getting out the rest of her books and papers from her bag. "I've got to finish this proofreading assignment first, then can we go over the proposal for the presentation in technical writing?"

"Of course," Gabrielle said, running her finger around the face of her wristwatch. "My next class is not for several more hours, so we have time."

"Great," Cascadia said, and finally got to work.

A CAR honked as the bus driver got back into traffic, startling Cascadia as she walked down the sidewalk away from the stop. It would have been a shorter trip to go through the parking lot of the small shopping center, but Cascadia never liked that way. Instead, she continued on the sidewalk, traversing the two legs of her triangular journey, in order to pass under the trees and over the grassy areas beside the road.

Nestled into the corner of the adjacent intersection was a small, short building

painted blue and white, with neon lights trimming the eaves and a neon sign atop the roof that read 'Grace's Diner' in yellow and red. Cascadia had never met Grace herself, and when she asked the staff, she got differing opinions on whether the name referred to a person or a state of being. Nevertheless, it was one of the places she enjoyed being the most.

Behind the glass-fronted door was the colorful gumball machine, and the standing sign with a chalked exhortation to 'seat yourselves'. It only took her a moment to find a head of dark hair seasoned with gray; there were only a handful of customers seated in the rows of booths that lined the front windows. She walked past the pictures of old cars and vintage movie posters which lined the walls, enjoying the pieces of the past that were preserved here. In more ways than one, she pondered, as they still served breakfast all day, offered free coffee, and hadn't yet gotten a credit card reader.

"Howdy Cascadia," the lone waitress called, before turning back to her customers. She was tall and lean, moving around the tight corners of the diner with her own kind of grace. Her long, pale blonde hair was done up in a bun, pinned with strategically placed clips. Gentle green eyes were a vivid contrast to her light, smooth skin, framed by laugh lines that didn't seem like they belonged on someone so young. Her usual half-lidded expression made her look like she was weary or tired, but never unkind. She wore a standard waitress uniform, knee-length black skirt and white blouse, with a half apron around her waist, plenty of pens at arm's length.

"Hello, Gayle!" Cascadia waved back.

"Hey hey," Ash said as she reached her seat. She pulled off her bag before seating herself. "How are things?"

"Pretty good," she said, glancing at the tabletop. Ash had been writing names and phone numbers on the free space of one of the children's coloring sheets, but was using a stub of a pencil instead of a crayon. Beside that was a bus route map, the kind that showed the entire city with a spaghetti of colored lines overlaid on it.

Cascadia paused before saying more. She could inquire about what was likely his finally looking into work prospects, or make no comment. If she chose silence, she would lose an opportunity to talk about something which was still a sore spot lately. If she went on, she risked irritating that sore spot further. She said a quick prayer for guidance, but was given a few more moments to deliberate by the arrival of the waitress.

"Hey y'all," Gayle said in her light Southern drawl. Cascadia had always liked Gayle's accent, it was somewhere between cowgirl and Southern belle, but uniquely hers. She set down a cup of coffee in front of Cascadia and refilled Ash's mug with the carafe in her other hand. "Just the usuals today?"

"Yes please," Cascadia said. "Thank you, Gayle."

Ash looked up into her green eyes. "Uh, yeah, thanks."

"Got it," Gayle said. "Say, Ash," she continued, putting her elbow on her hip to support the carafe of coffee. "I hope you don't mind me overhearin' you on the phone, it sounded like you might be interested in a job situation?"

Cascadia became interested in the menu.

Ash nodded. "Yeah, that's right. I'm only working part-time right now."

"Well, I'll tell you what," Gayle continued. "Ol' Jerry, he's been talkin' about gettin' someone to help out in the back durin' the rush. If'n you wanna, I can give 'im your name."

"Umm..." Ash quailed. He knew what Cascadia was thinking, trying not to seem expectant as she waited for his answer. Gayle probably didn't care one way or the other, but he still decided to delay. "I'll think about it, but thanks for letting me know."

"Sure thing," Gayle said. "I'll get your orders in now," and she sidled off.

Ash wrote 'Grace's, ask for Jerry,' on his impromptu notepad, then set down the pencil.

Cascadia took a breath, still praying for guidance. "Ash, I—"

"Please, Cas," Ash interrupted. "I don't wanna talk about it. I've got this, alright?"

Cascadia took a long breath, closing her eyes. When she got the rolling waves of her heart still again, she found the words she had been looking for shining out at her. "I understand. The last time that we talked about this, it didn't exactly go well. So, I'd like to try the last thing I said over again, if that's alright?"

Ash tried avoiding her imploring blue eyes, but couldn't. "Okay." He had his elbows on the table, his hands clasped.

She smiled to show that she wasn't about to yell again, speaking slowly and carefully with her hands on her lap. "Because of the agreements that we've made, your financial stability is of... high concern to me. I only have two more years of school, after all."

Ash nodded.

"So..." She smiled at him genuinely now, warmly. "I want you to succeed. Not only for your future, but for mine. If I can do anything to help, please let me know." She put her hands on the table now as well. "Thank you for listening to me," and she nodded.

Ash did feel better, the momentary flare-up of his emotions quenched. "I know Cas, I just..." he let out a sigh. "This is just hard, you know?"

She gave him a mischievous look. "I thought you said you didn't wanna talk about it."

He rolled his eyes. "Okay, maybe I do. It's like I said last time, the more I'm around... stoves and ovens," he dropped his voice, "the more potential for... trouble."

She shrugged. "Well, this is the reason I don't want a job as a... plumber or anything."

"Or a lifeguard."

"Yeah, definitely not. I guess you just need to decide whether or not you want to be a chef, or just really enjoy cooking."

"Yeah," he said quietly. "I guess so."

Gayle arrived a moment later with Cascadia's cereal bowl and a tiny carton of milk. She addressed Ash. "Yours'll be done in a minute, hon, there ain't a lotta orders right now."

"Great, thanks," Ash said. Gayle returned to the bar near the kitchen.

The companions connected until their food arrived; work had been fine, he had gotten to eat a rejected calzone that was still delicious; her classes were good, she had talked with Gabrielle and wanted to go to a concert with her. She got out her crossword book and asked him if he knew a ten-letter species of mushroom that started with a 'p' and had two 'l's' in it.

As Gayle had predicted, it was only a few minutes before their food arrived. Cascadia had added the milk to her bowl of granola upon obtaining it, but hadn't eaten any since it hadn't achieved its desired level of sogginess. Gayle set a platter down on the edge of the table, serving Cascadia a plate with two eggs sunny-side-up and a glass of orange juice. For Ash, a white plate piled with scrambled eggs, hash browns, slices of bacon, and toast.

"There y'all are," Gayle said, holding the tray in front of her. "I'll be back for your coffee."

Both of them thanked her, then prayed over the meal, Ash again making the

joke about saying Grace in Grace's Diner. Cascadia enjoyed the smooth texture of the drowned cereal, while Ash appreciated the simpler flavor profiles of the food compared to the complicated dishes he made all morning. He wanted to make his toast a little crispier, but Gayle was on her way back already.

Their waitress refilled their coffee cups, then set the carafe on the empty table across from them and checked around the room to ensure she wasn't needed, finally leaning against the edge of the table so she faced her customers. "So, what's on tap for your night out after this?"

Cascadia responded excitedly. "Oh, we're going to catch a movie. It's animated, kind of geared toward kids, but I've read the graphic novel it's based on and it sounds like it'll be really good. It's about a brother and sister who live on a farm and find nature spirits living there, they have to help them avoid being exploited by the adults, classic stuff."

"Huh," Gayle said. "I know someone who might like that." She glanced out the windows briefly. "What else've you two been up to lately?" Ash noticed she smelled faintly of cigarettes, she must have just returned from a break.

Cascadia swallowed her sip of orange juice. She knew what good news she wanted to share right away. "And, I sold a story to a magazine, I just got the letter yesterday," she said, beaming.

"Well ain't that somethin'," Gayle said. "Congratulations, hon."

"Thank you," Cascadia said.

Gayle shifted against the table. "So lunch is on you today?"

Ash chuckled. "No, she already treated me yesterday."

"Lucky you, then," Gayle said. "And I'm glad for you, Cascadia. I know how many hours you've spent in here scribblin' away at some story." She clapped her hands softly but suddenly. "Hey, what magazine is it? I could get one and put it up there on the wall near the window."

"Oh come on, Gayle," Cascadia said dismissively. "It's not that big of a deal."

"Well, I think it is."

"I think so too," Ash contributed, looking at Cascadia, who was turning pink, her freckles disappearing. "You've been working really hard at this."

"Alright you two," she said, trying to keep her emotional waves still. "You're both right. It's great, so there."

Ash grinned at Gayle, and she smiled back. Only one corner of her mouth turned up at a time, giving her a sort of lopsided grin. The bell above the door

signaled her impromptu break was over.

"Howdy Frank," Gayle called. "Gotta go, chat with y'all later."

Ash returned to his food, but Cascadia didn't, her face dour. "You didn't have to make such a fuss over me," she hissed quietly. "It was embarrassing."

Ash shrugged. "Hey, I didn't start it, it was Gayle's idea. Besides, you deserve some praise, I know how hard it was for you just to send it in to them."

"Yeah." She continued to work through her slurry of granola, attempting to get herself out of the stew of her feelings. It took her a moment to notice the milk in the bowl swirling around even though she wasn't moving the spoon, so she changed the subject. "What time is the movie again?"

He checked his watch. "We still have about forty-five minutes."

"Okay."

Ash glanced across the table at her, but her eyes were out the window on the street again. The rest of their meal was put away in a more subdued mood. Ash managed to bring her spirits up a bit by telling a story from his shift about a server who had nearly dropped a plate of food, but somehow juggled it back up into his hands without spilling any of it.

As Ash was clearing up the table, he was startled by a customer raising their voice. "I've been eating here for fifteen years and paid the same for that plate every time!"

"I'm real sorry, sir," Gayle said soothingly. "I understand, I really do. There've been some changes in prices at the store lately, sometimes we hafta make some adjustments."

"Well, I'd rather eat less food than pay more money for it."

"I would've loved to do that, sir, exceptin' that you've already eaten it all."

Ash and Cascadia tried not to stare and instead packed up their respective bags and put on their coats, pooling their money on the table to pay for their meals and to give Gayle a modest tip for her kindness. Ash felt the few bills remaining in his pocket as he glanced at the upset patron once again. Cascadia smiled at him and headed to the door, while the customer had resolved his issue and left with his wife toward the opposite exit. Ash followed Cascadia, heading past where Gayle was cleaning up the table.

"Hey Gayle," Ash said quietly as he passed her.

"Yeah, hon?"

"Did that guy pay his whole bill?"

Gayle paused for a moment. "If I say no, are you gonna go shake 'im down for the rest?"

Ash froze, embarrassed. "No, nothing like that. I was just wondering."

"He's all taken care of," Gayle said. "Just another loyal customer, is all."

"Alright. Well, see you later Gayle."

"Sure thing," she said, adding the last plate to her bussing tray.

Outside the restaurant, Cascadia couldn't help but satisfy her curiosity. "Were you gonna offer to pay for that guy?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. We've had a lot of customers complaining too about the food prices. The servers get an earful, and they dump it back on us. I understand how he felt."

Cascadia nodded, glancing at him sideways. Ash didn't have enough money to go around donating it to restaurant patrons.

THE MOVIE theater wasn't the popular place to be on a Tuesday afternoon, but there was still a fair crowd of people, mostly moms shepherding their children to the feature of the day. Cascadia guessed it was still too early for dads to be off work yet, or they would rather watch something a little more action-oriented. For their part, the lack of action was just fine, as was the price of admission. The scheduling board above the ticket windows listed films released many months ago, some of which could already be found on video. Cascadia did have a VCR, but they had both agreed that a movie was better experienced on the big screen.

The framed posters that lined the walls of the lobby area ranged from the current lineup of films to some that had come out years ago, ones the staff evidently liked too much to take down. Ash smelled the warm popcorn as they stood in line for a ticket. He checked the board; the showing they wanted hadn't changed from the time listed in the newspaper. He thumbed through his wallet, a few cards and a couple of bills, then concernedly checked his other pockets. "Do you have those coupons for the tickets? I can't find them."

Cascadia pulled herself away from the posters and the people. "Umm, I thought I got them, they were on my desk this morning when I left for class..." She searched through her own belongings also, periodically moving forward as the line progressed. The embarrassment washed over her. "And, apparently they're still there."

He felt a flare-up coming, like the stove at dinner last night. "Oh my gosh, Cascadia..." He tightened his face.

She winced. The extra three syllables of her name were little pricks at her heart. Three embers tossed into the water, sending up little clouds of steam.

Ash knew he should have taken care of it himself, but he had wanted to give her a chance after last time. "Okay," he said more steadily. "Let's just go home then. We can watch TV instead."

Cascadia steadied her breathing. She prayed for the grace to not start a fight right there in public, and mercifully, she got it. "No, don't worry about it. We're already here. I'll pay for both tickets. It was my mistake, so I'll make amends for it now."

Ash scratched the side of his head, fingers through his short black hair. "Alright." He had felt a good yell coming on, but once again she helped him to see the situation in perspective. She had calmed the flame back down to embers.

The theater darkened while the projector whirred to life. Cascadia could hear it, as they were in one of the highest rows. Their only neighbors were a couple of older kids who wanted to assert their independence; all the other patrons, both young and motherly, were down in the middle and front rows. Ash and Cascadia huddled together so they could whisper jokes and commentary to one another more easily. The adjustable arm rest was down, a hard plastic chaperone.

The first preview began with scenes of an idyllic family Christmas; it took her a moment to realize how long ago this movie had been initially released, a testament to its enduring popularity. A montage of holiday scenes quickly grew darker, black shadows stretching across the white snow. From what she could piece together, an evil force was threatening the happiness of the world at Christmastime and the protagonist took on the literal mantle of Santa Claus to defeat it, aided by the spirits of the nine reindeer. It sounded interesting, she wanted to see if it was available on video yet.

As the second trailer started, Cascadia leaned over to her companion. "Ash," she whispered.

"Yeah?"

"I'm sorry I forgot the coupons. Please forgive my trespass."

Ash shifted his gaze from the screen to her eyes. Blue and gray reflected the bright colors of the film in front of them. He didn't need to deliberate. "I'm sorry I

yelled at you in line. And that I embarrassed you in the diner."

"Oh, and I gave you a hard time about a job."

"Okay. Please forgive my trespass too."

She nodded, then extended her hand, little finger raised. He did the same, and they linked their smallest fingers. By joining together through their weakest digits, their bond was that much stronger.

Ninety minutes later, full of optimism and hope for the future, the positive message of friendship and teamwork had thoroughly soaked into their minds. Their destination now was the bus stop at the other end of the complex.

Ash stretched out his back after sitting for so long. "So, was it as good as the book?"

"It wasn't a book, it was a graphic novel, but yes. I didn't agree with most of the voices, Aidan did them totally differently when he read it to me when we were kids. But, it was nice to watch a kid's movie that wasn't full of songs every few minutes."

"Better than being full of tears, right?"

Cascadia smirked. "Okay, odd Scripture reference, but sure."

Ash kept it rolling. He held up his hand to the side of his mouth, to pantomime parentheses. "This is Israel's song."

She picked it up. "They will say, the Lord has done great things for us."

"The Lord has done great things for us!" he echoed.

Each was glad that the rough moods of the afternoon had been washed and burned away, respectively. Ash smiled. "We should start reading Vespers every night again, it was fun."

THE BUS ride back to their apartment building was one of their shorter journeys, since they didn't have to change buses in University Square first. The sun was nearly touching the horizon now, casting much of the streets in golden twilight. Cascadia wanted to wax poetic about the colors and the scenery, but it was difficult with her mind still on the movie. Too many thoughts in the water at once.

"I need to stop by the store on the way," Ash was saying, consulting a scrap of paper from his pocket. "I ran out of cumin and turmeric."

Cascadia turned to him, eyes wide with alarm. "Oh no, we can't have curry night without cumin and turmeric!"

"That's why I'm going to fix that problem," he said confidently.

"Oh, did you get that ghee recipe I sent you? You'd said something about wanting to make it yourself, since it was so easy."

"Umm..." he patted down his pockets. "No?"

She rolled her eyes. "I sent it to your email, so you could print it out if you want."

"Ah... I haven't checked it in a while..."

Instead of arriving at the stop near the church, this route deposited them closer to the apartment building. The neighborhood market nestled into the street corner was easy to spot, but even easier to smell. Pungent aromas of spices and peppers invited locals just as readily as the hand-painted advertisements on the windows. Tortillas and naan bread, samosas and tacos, and the house specialty, the currito.

As soon as Cascadia walked through the door, she greeted the young lady behind the counter, a girl near her age with brown skin and black hair, dressed in a long-sleeved white shirt with a green vest over. "Hello Jacinta," she said, going over to speak to her.

"Hi Cascadia," she answered in a subdued tone. "Hi Ash," she said to the same as he entered, and he waved back.

Cascadia continued. "So, your being here means Lakshmi isn't feeling any better?"

"Yeah, she might be out all week."

"Sorry to hear that," she said, reading the countertop with its prices for calling cards to two different countries. Cascadia listened to Jacinta's lament over having to make twice as many tortillas with her mother every day until they could get more help.

Ash was relieved to see Jacinta on duty and not her sister. He didn't want to be fawned over tonight; it was embarrassing. He breathed in the deep smell of mixed spices: ginger and chili peppers, cardamom and mustards, what he liked to call 'chipotle masala.'

Instead of going straight to the shelf with the bagged spices, he browsed through the packed aisles. Colorful piñatas hung beside ristras of dried chili peppers. Boxes of rava dosa, which looked like they were supposed to be made

into pancakes. Whole dried shrimp and bags of banana chips. It was always an exciting experience, but he had to make certain he stuck to his budget, which was whatever money he had in his pockets.

The spice racks were at the back of the store, near the meat counter. Chicken, pork, and fish shared space with shrimp, goat, and lamb. A dark-skinned, smiling fellow with round glasses and a short beard hailed Ash from behind the counter, speaking Spanish.

"Hola Mr. Gopinder," Ash replied. He chatted with the proprietor for a few minutes in their shared tongue, the elder giving his recommendations about the best ingredients for his latest curry creation, and Ash offering his own insights. They parted ways, and he found Cascadia in the aisles examining various brightly colored candies.

"Is this the brown sugar one I like?" she asked, holding up a rich brown confection on a stick.

"Um, no, that's tamarindo."

She made a face as sour as the flavor. "No way."

He picked up a dark red lollipop instead. "Here, jamaica is usually sweeter."

Cascadia balked. "You mean that big, crunchy potato thing you put on tacos? Those aren't sweet."

"No, that's a jícama. This is hibiscus flower."

"That sounds better." She grinned, even more as he added it to his handful of spice bags and package of naan bread and headed to the front of the store.

"Okay, new rules," Ash said in a determined tone, putting his hands on the kitchen table, "especially after what happened last time. We each take a bite, whoever gives up first does the dishes. And no talents, promise?"

"I promise," Cascadia answered, wrapping up her half-eaten jamaica lollipop and setting it down next to her utensils. "Although, you have to admit that diluting each bite with extra water from the air was a fabulous idea."

"It was pretty clever."

The sun had already gone down, so the single light fixture on the ceiling of Ash's apartment cast a yellow pallor over the room. He had laid out the usual spread: three bowls of thick vindaloo, both with tofu and potatoes for simplicity, two glasses of milk, and a plate of naan between them. The bread was cold; Cascadia didn't like it toasted and Ash preferred to toast his manually.

"I have been practicing, though," Cascadia said wryly, "even without my talent." With the cup in her hand, she drew the milk out and curled the stream into a little knot. "This is the same recipe as last time, right?"

"Right. I think we're at a good place." He rolled his neck on his shoulders. "Ready?"

"You know I am," she said, waggling her eyebrows.

"Then go," Ash said, reaching for the spoon and eating a delicious fiery mouthful. He grinned at the expression of pain on Cascadia's face she was fighting to suppress. Even with her preferred technique of swallowing the spoonful right away, it still did damage on the way down. By the second spoon, he could see the tears forming in her eyes, but they evaporated without her wiping them away.

For his part, he was confident he could eat the whole bowl, and then some. He kept the smug look off his own face as his opponent struggled before him. After seven spoons, Cascadia slapped the table with her palm.

"I give up," she said in a strangled voice, taking a drink of the blessedly cool milk and following it with a bite of bread.

"Not bad," Ash said, grilling a piece of bread on his palm. "A more accurate measure of your skill than sixteen, huh?"

"Hey, I need all the advantages I can get over you." She put her hands on her hips. "It's not fair, chili pepper heat isn't really heat, you shouldn't be un-spiceable too."

He shrugged. "I guess I'm caliente-proof *and* picante-proof."

"Oh well," Cascadia said, pulling the third bowl of soup toward her, free from any kind of heat. "Maybe you'll use up all your resistance eventually and I'll be able to beat you then."

He smirked. "Doubt it."

She gestured with her spoon. "At least my talent helps me do the dishes faster..."

Cascadia was awoken by a high-pitched beeping. She slapped at the alarm clock, bleary-eyed, but the noise would not abate. After finally getting one eye open and pushing aside the coppery curtain of her hair, she could see it was two a.m. She sat bolt upright, her loose hair spilling around her. It was the *other* alarm.

She pushed off her embroidered quilt and switched on the nickel-plated lamp beside her. Now she could clearly see the readout on the wireless oven thermometer: one hundred fifty degrees and rising. She silenced it.

The exterior lights from the courtyard shone through the curtain despite the best efforts of the blinds, so she had a slightly lower chance of bumping her knee or knocking over a pile of books. She got a sweater from the wardrobe, pulled it on over her one-piece nightgown, and slipped on her house shoes. It was a short walk out of her apartment, locking the door behind her. She opened up Ash's as quietly as possible.

It felt like walking into a sauna; the heat poured out into the hallway. She slipped inside and shut the door as quietly as possible. Ash lay on his bed, the sheet he slept under having been kicked off to his waist.

He was mumbling something, it sounded like "get out," and she was fairly sure she knew what he was dreaming about. She approached his bed slowly, gauging the heat level as she went. Getting closer, she could see the probe end of the thermometer tied to the headboard, faithfully doing its job.

Cascadia put her hands gently on Ash's forehead, drawing water from the warm air to moisten his skin. A special kind of anointing, a laying on of hands unique to her, and to him. As she applied her ministrations, she meditated on the providence that had brought them together, for them to each have such unique and complementary talents. His murmuring and shaking lessened.

She didn't need the other end of the thermometer to know the temperature in the room was lowering. She put a little water on his wrists as well, since he wouldn't wake up unless she completely drenched him. Smiling at that particular memory, she pulled up the sheet and whispered a prayer before going back to her own apartment.

Episode 03- Here & There

"ASH, COME on!" Cascadia yelled through the door to his bathroom. "If you want to ride the bus with me, then we need to leave now!" She crossed her arms and sighed, fully dressed in her blue hooded sweatshirt over a long-sleeved shirt, with a pair of leggings under her long teal skirt to ward off the cold. Her sling pack was full of the necessities for the day, including lunch and snacks.

"I'll be out in a minute, literally," Ash whined from the other side. "It's just so early, I don't understand how you do this."

"It's six a.m.," she chided him. "I had class at *five* last year. Besides, you're the one who picked up a prep shift."

"Remind me to not do that again. Only lunch or dinner from now on."

"Nope, you're on your own with that one, buddy."

Within his promised minute, Ash emerged mostly prepared for the day, putting on his special non-slip shoes and grabbing his backpack from the chair. He noticed the black insulated travel mug on the table, which hadn't been there when he had gulped down breakfast.

Cascadia said in a sweet voice: "I got you a coffee."

He took a sip before stowing it in the side pocket of his backpack. "Thanks, I appreciate it."

They left his apartment, he locked up quickly. Together they walked downstairs and across the plaza to the bus stop.

"There's nobody out here," Ash commented.

"Oh will you stop," she teased. "Go have a nap after work."

"I would..." He yawned. "Except Óscar Mario is going to pick me up. He was gonna take me to that restaurant that just opened and introduce me."

"Oh, I hope that goes well." She pulled the hood of her sweatshirt around her head tighter, her light red braid emerging at her neck.

"Yeah, me too."

The bus driver that morning was a dapper fellow in his fifties who always wore a red bow tie with his uniform shirt. He greeted them both by name as they boarded, and they reciprocated on the way to their seats. Cascadia scribbled on one of her waterproof notepads, while Ash closed his eyes and kept his fire fueled with coffee and a granola bar.

The bus turned the corner off the main street and toward the university. Cascadia tucked away her crossword book and the rest of her belongings.

"I have chemistry lab today at noon," she reminded him. "But even with that, I should be home no later than two. Either way, I'll text you when I'm on my way out."

Ash nodded. "Sounds good. I promised Óscar Mario lunch, so I'll make extra for you, too."

Cascadia's heart filled with a quiet, clear joy at their friendly domestic situation.

Ash got up so she could get off. She turned to him and smiled sweetly, giving him a little wave before she stepped off the bus.

Ash arrived at the restaurant more alert from his home-made coffee and companionship. He accepted the orders from the kitchen manager: this many containers of mushrooms, that many onions, all these garlic heads. As he chopped and measured and par-boiled pasta, a dark-haired man a little older than Ash prepped the lasagna and other pre-made dishes. Neither cook was interested in small talk. Unlike a kitchen shift where their clock out times were up to the whims of the customers, they could leave when they were done, so efficiency trumped socializing that morning.

On a break, he sat down to rest in the dining room, since there wasn't anywhere good to sit in the kitchen other than the business office. He found Jenna there, folding linens and wiping down tables. She was surprised to see him instead of the usual prepper. Ash checked his phone: Cascadia said hello, Óscar Mario was on schedule. Sooner than later, it was back to work.

It was the middle of the morning by the time he was cleared to go by the manager. He sent a text message to Cascadia while he waited at the curb for a

sleek, polished gray car to arrive and park in front of the restaurant. Ash could feel the bass vibrations of the stereo system, the tubas and horns shaking his insides. He didn't understand how anyone could even enjoy it at that volume. As soon as the car parked, though, the music mercifully stopped.

"Hey, man!" the guy who must have been Óscar Mario said, as Ash got buckled in. Despite his colorful t-shirt and loose jeans, his chosen career as a mechanic was apparent from his calloused hands pitted with permanent black grease stains. His hair was cut severely short, and his nose looked like Ash's, long and pointed. "¿Que pasa?"

"Oh you know," Ash responded. "Viviendo la vida."

"Great, dude. Let's vamonos, they haven't even opened yet."

It would have been a long journey by bus to the small Mexican restaurant on the east side of town, but with a ride from Óscar Mario, Ash got there in almost no time. It was indeed small, the dining room was about as big as his apartment, and the kitchen was only slightly larger. The owner was confident about their prospects, showing Ash around while discussing the particulars in Spanish. Óscar Mario took a phone call outside.

Ash wrote the details down on one of the newly printed takeout menus, which was rather small because of the focus on the traditional dishes they provided. Ash would be working longer hours, but at a lower pay rate. He would have to do the math at home, but it seemed promising. They exchanged phone numbers, and he found Óscar Mario still on the phone, although he ended the conversation quickly.

"Done already? How'd it go?" he asked.

Ash looked at the menu with his notes again. "I said I'd think about it and let him know by tomorrow."

"That's good, man," Óscar Mario said as they got in the car and pulled out of the parking lot. "Take some time and pray about it, right? Don't just jump in both feet."

"Yeah," Ash said, resolving to add it to his intentions. The phone in his pocket vibrated and chirped at him. He opened it, hoping to see Cascadia's response to his earlier text, but it was just the shift coverage group for his current job. This new opportunity didn't feel particularly good, but not particularly bad either. It was, like most things, just kind of there.

ASH PULLED the plastic food container out of the refrigerator. "Are you sure you don't want any?"

"No way, dude," Óscar Mario replied, sitting at the table across the room with a piece of naan bread. "You make that stuff way too picante. It's like, picante gigante. Unless there's any of the plain stuff you make for Cascadia."

"No, she took it for lunch today."

"Then make me tacos or whatever man, you promised lunch, and you wouldn't let me buy you anything at that restaurant."

Ash sat down at the table with the leftovers of his gigantically spicy curry, eating right from the container with a spoon. "First of all, I owe you for the ride, and second, that restaurant was just a birrieria."

"Yeah, but it's a *new* birrieria. You know what that means," Óscar Mario said pointedly.

"Yeah, but what about when the new business rush wears off?" Ash read the bus route map he had spread out on the table earlier. "And, it's so far out there. What if the bus is late? I can't walk unless I start the night before."

"Dude, he won't care. You have citizenship, he'll be happy with whatever you do."

"Yeah," Ash said again.

Óscar Mario wiped the crumbs from the bread off his hands and leaned back. "Hey, if it doesn't work out, you could always go help Gui with the taco truck." He tilted his head. "He's starting to get more around downtown now that it's mas *cálido*, right? He'll even come pick you up from here."

Ash raised an eyebrow. "Even after what happened last year?"

"Aw, he's a nice guy. Insurance took care of the stuff, and Jesus took care of him."

"I'll keep that in mind too," Ash said, stirring his curry.

Óscar Mario made a *tsk'ing* sound. "Come on, man, you can't just keep working part time and you know it. What if they cut your hours even more? The only reason you can afford it here is 'cause you don't have a car."

"I know," Ash said lamely.

"Ash," Óscar Mario said, which was surprising. He usually just called him 'man' or 'dude.' "The birrieria is a great opportunity," he gestured to the menu, "and Gui is a pretty good one. I hope you're paying attention." He sat back and put

his hands in his pockets. "My work here is done, and so is my appetizer. When's the main course?"

Ash's thoughts about making lunch for his current company automatically spun off new thoughts about meat alternatives for the company that wasn't nearby. Which led to the fact they had used all their tofu last night. "Hang on, I need to text Cas something." He messaged a request for her to pick some up on her way home, which is what she should have been doing right then, if he had his scheduling correct.

Óscar Mario shook his head, his mouth tight. "Man, I swear."

"What?"

He leveled his dark brown eyes at him. "When are you gonna just quit and start dating her already?"

"Oh, come on," Ash said, setting down his phone and taking another spoonful of curry, so he didn't let something even spicier come out of his mouth.

"Yo serio," Óscar Mario continued. "You two are like, cute banana nuts together. She's got you totally wrapped around her finger." He raised his little finger to illustrate, which Ash found rather ironic.

"She does not," Ash said, but Óscar Mario's eyebrows canceled his rebuttal.

"You cook her dinner every day."

"She would just eat cereal and crackers instead."

"You know her eating habits," he pointed out.

"We've known each other a long time..." Ash felt he was losing traction in this debate.

"Which is an excellent way to know if someone is madly enamorado with you," he countered.

"Which we're... not," Ash said.

Óscar Mario pointed his finger at him. "Says the guy who moved in next door."

Ash closed his eyes and shook his head. "Okay, fine. You win. I'll propose tonight."

Óscar Mario raised his hands in mock defeat. "I'm just saying, man. You wait too long and some guapo might snatch her up."

Ash's nostrils flared. "Are you saying I'm not guapo?"

Óscar Mario made a defiant face. "Maybe."

"Whatever, man," Ash said, pushing his chair away from the table.

Óscar Mario looked pleased. "Anyway, I'm starving. The service around here is terrible." He scouted around the room for the wait staff. "Let's get with the comida."

Ash put on his apron and set the cast iron pan on the stove. Óscar Mario complained again that Ash had moved his TV next door, so he just sat on the loveseat and talked, which was his favorite pastime anyway. "The problem with Zaragoza is he can't kick for nothing. I dunno why they gave up Mendez, now he was something else, man. Without him, they definitely won't make the World Cup." When he gazed up at the ceiling during his monologue, Ash turned the knob to ignite the burner, and provided the spark himself.

While the pan warmed, Ash checked his phone for a response from his neighbor, and didn't find any. She also hadn't responded to his text while he had been waiting at the restaurant three hours ago. She was usually prompt to reply, but there were a lot of reasons why she wouldn't, so he just focused on the task at hand. He laid the meat out in strips over the hot surface, not noticing he was holding on to the pan handle without the insulating cover. Ash slipped it on before Óscar Mario noticed.

At short length, the meal was ready, and they said Grace before eating. Ash placed his cell phone on the table so he could see if it sprang to life with good news. Óscar Mario scoffed. "See man, you can't even go an hour or two without talking to her. Classic symptoms of being in love."

"Yeah, sure," Ash said, not really focused. He finished his second taco and stood up to go to the window. "I'm just gonna call her, I get better reception over here."

He ignored his friend's dissatisfied noises while it rang. Sure enough, he got her voicemail. *You've reached Cascadia's phone*, she had recorded in a singsong tone. *Please leave a message and I'll get back to you when I'm done reading.*

Ash closed his phone, studying the sky above the courtyard. He knew he was encouraging Óscar Mario's ribbing by constantly reaching out, but felt he had reason to be concerned. He checked his watch again; he hadn't heard from or spoken to her for nearly eight hours, but she was supposed to be home in less than one. She usually came over or at least announced herself whenever she arrived, but he wanted to be certain.

"Dude, are you gonna eat that?" Óscar Mario asked after Ash's untouched third taco.

"Sure," Ash said, "I mean, you can have it. I'll be right back though, I need something in Cas' apartment."

"Don't be gone too long in there!"

Next door, he found a sticky note from her desk and scrawled 'Please come over' on it, then stuck it to the front of her refrigerator. He also checked over the printout of her school schedule she had left there. It matched up with what she had said earlier; her lab was the last class on Wednesday, then she came home. He checked his phone again, no messages. He also glanced at the answering machine on her landline phone, but there were no calls.

His fear immediately went to the extreme: she had been hit by a car, mugged, hurt or worse. That wasn't helping. He prayed for peace, to stop adding fuel to his already-raging inner fire. She was a smart, capable woman with plenty of resources at her disposal. Including one resource nobody else had, he noted with hope. However, that same resource was also a liability.

Folding the schedule into his pocket, he went back to his own apartment. Óscar Mario was scraping up every bit of food from his plate. Seeing Ash's undisguised concern, his jovial mood changed. "Dude, everything alright?"

Ash hesitated. Óscar Mario was one of the few people from his youth he could still call a friend, and what did friends do but help? "No," he said firmly. "Cascadia isn't answering her phone, and hasn't all day. She's supposed to be home in a little while, though."

"Bummer, dude."

Ash sat at the table next to him, regretting he hadn't eaten his last taco after all.

Óscar Mario regarded him for a moment, then continued. "Maybe her phone ran out of battery?"

"Yeah, she forgets to charge it sometimes, and she forgets the spare battery. But she carries change for payphones."

"Does she forget that too?"

"No, actually," this thought bringing him a momentary reprieve from his fear. "She never forgets it because she likes to give it to panhandlers."

"Huh," Óscar Mario said. He checked his watch, an expensive metal-banded one. "I better get to fregando los platos. Wouldn't want to leave you with a mess, eh?"

Ash didn't know what to say for a moment. Óscar Mario never offered to

clean up when he ate over at Ash's place. "Oh, thanks."

At the top of the next hour, Ash called Cascadia again and was similarly unsuccessful. He had heard no doors opening nearby, no forgetful young ladies knocking on his. Ash felt fairly confident it was time to upgrade his concern into full-blown worry.

Óscar Mario turned away from the sink full of dishes. "Nothing yet?"

"No, but maybe the bus was late."

"Yeah, maybe. Hey man, why don't we play cards after I'm done?"

In a surprisingly subtle way, Óscar Mario was supporting him, being there when he needed help. Ash decided to be less subtle in return. "Thanks for staying, man, I appreciate it."

Óscar Mario gave him a toothy grin. "Dude, don't worry about it. We're amigos, right?"

"Right."

A few rounds of poker later, not much had changed. Ash shuffled the deck of playing cards. "Okay, it's three o'clock, I'm officially worried."

"No kidding, man."

"I dunno what to do now, though."

Óscar Mario leaned back in his chair. "One time, I needed to get a hold of cousin Berto, it was when Abuela Rosa passed," they both made the Sign of the Cross in silent prayer, kissing their fingertips before he continued, "but he was in class. I called the main office, and they sent someone to find him. It was just like in high school, man."

"Yeah, maybe I'll try that." He still had the number for the university administration in his phone, so he found it and dialed. Óscar Mario checked his own phone while he waited.

"Um, hi, my friend is a student there, and I was wondering if you had any way to reach her?... Her name is Cascadia Dewlenser... Yeah, she had classes today, she might still be on campus... I was a student, I should be in the system, Ash Grisarco," he gave his student ID number as well. "I'm listed as her emergency contact... I'm not sure if it's an emergency, I just can't seem to reach her... Okay, I'll wait."

Óscar Mario met Ash's eyes during the pause in the conversation and nodded at him confidently.

"What do you mean, I'm not on her file? She filled out that form in front of

me. Can I contact a professor directly, I have her schedule right here... No, all her family members are in Ireland, they can't come down to the office... Alright, fine..." He wanted to just hang up. He really did. "Thank you for your help, have a good day."

"That was worth a try," Óscar Mario said, putting away his phone.

Ash looked at his watch again. "I think I should go down there, maybe she got stuck, or held up somewhere."

"Good idea, dude. Let's go." Óscar Mario stood up and brushed off his shirt.

Ash wasn't about to turn down the kindness of not having to ride the bus in the afternoon. "Thanks. I mean it."

ÓSCAR MARIO'S sleek little car pulled up to the curb behind a bus waiting to accept students and ferry them back to their homes. Ash was ready to get out, he didn't bring much except for his phone and wallet.

"Alright man," Óscar Mario said. "This is the end of the line for me, I gotta get back to Felicia and the kids. It's been fun, at least the first part of the day anyway."

Ash nodded. "Thanks again." He turned to him and they gripped each other's hands.

"Buena suerte, lemme know when you find her, okay?"

"I will," Ash said. He got out of the car and walked under the trees lining the road to the front of the building.

Óscar Mario drove away while he decided what to do next. He had her class schedule in his pocket, he could find the rooms she would have been in throughout the day, but she might still be in chemistry lab for some reason. That was on the other side of campus, though, and right in front of him was the student union building. It was as good a place as any to search, except that Cascadia hardly ever went in there. Still, he reasoned he could walk through the long brick building to the other side where he needed to be, and check one place off the list.

Plenty of classes were still in session, but plenty more students were done for the day and ready to relax. Ash entered the building and glanced around, looking for any familiar faces. Not just Cascadia, but any of her friends, or even any of his that might be able to give him information. Ultimately, his trip past the mini fast-food restaurants and coffee counters, through the sea of dining tables, was

unsuccessful. He went out the back of the building toward the rest of the campus, having one less place to consider.

This path took him along a tree-filled avenue with grass on either side, even though both were still mostly brown at this time of year. Memories of his days as a student drifted back like smoke, familiar corners and walkways, although most of those memories involved a certain freckle-faced girl, so they weren't too comforting right now. He was grateful his path led him around the northern side of the campus and not the southern one, so he could stay as far away from the culinary arts building as possible.

The mirrored windows of the library loomed into view, one of the tallest buildings on campus, and definitely one of Cascadia's favorites. He'd spent many afternoons typing up his written assignments on sugar caramelization while she studied nearby. Ash took the steps two at a time, entering via the large automatic doors into the main lobby area.

Another scattering of tables just inside the doors helped students gather beside the tiny coffee booth. Cascadia was not among them, but there was a blonde woman talking into a tape recorder with a large dog at her feet.

The petite girl at the front desk was eager to help him locate a patron rather than a book, but regretfully had no way to keep track of who went in or out. She was willing to use Cascadia's student ID number to confirm she hadn't checked anything out since last week, after verifying his own identification first. She wished him well, and he had a quick check around the rest of the main floor, scanning through the atrium windows at the other four visible floors. That was a lot of space to cover, and not really worth the effort if there was another way. On his way out, he asked the librarian if there were security cameras in the building, which she confirmed. However, the footage was only available to campus security. Noting this down on the schedule with one of the tiny pencils on the desk, he thanked her and left.

While heading out, he saw the blonde lady again, who wasn't talking aloud anymore, but now running her hands over a book on the table. Something about this behavior triggered his memory, a burst of heat in his mind, and he recognized her.

Ash approached Gabrielle carefully, not quite remembering what to do, since on the other two occasions he had spoken to her, Cascadia had been there as well.

As it was, he didn't have to worry too much about etiquette, as the golden-

brown dog at her feet took care of introductions by growling at him, ears back.

"Edward," Gabrielle scolded, reaching down to touch him on his head. "What is the matter now? Are you being unkind to that person who's standing near us? And you were so nice to those children on the bus this morning..."

Ash took a step back as he realized what was likely the matter with the highly intelligent animal. Ever since he had arrived at the campus, he had been running warmer than usual, fueled by the stress and anxiety. His hands weren't hot enough to burn anything, but as soon as he released the spark he'd been nurturing, Edward stopped growling and licked his chops, enjoying Gabrielle's attention.

"That's a good dog," he said aloud, not really meaning to.

"Hello there," Gabrielle said, turning her head in his direction. "Sorry about the dog, he's usually so nice. Was there something you needed?"

"Umm, yeah, actually," he said, a little uncertain. "I don't know if you remember me, but I'm—"

Gabrielle held up her hand suddenly. "Please, just a moment. Indulge me, if you will, since you're right, your voice sounds familiar, I have probably only spoken to you once or twice, is that right?"

"Heh, yeah," he said, smiling now despite the mood of the afternoon.

"Let's see now," she said, pondering. "You are clearly a man, around my age, with a slight accent, possibly Spanish or another language of that type, but..." She paused for a moment. "But I cannot seem to place you. Thank you for letting me have my fun." She clasped her hands on the book in front of her.

"Oh, you're welcome. So, I'm Ash, I'm friends with Cascadia."

Gabrielle's smile widened. "Oh yes, I remember you now. It was raining that day, and you had just stopped by on your way to class. Anyway, what can I do for you now?"

"Well, I was actually wondering if you'd seen Cascadia today—" he winced. "Sorry, what I meant was..."

"Please, don't worry. That is hardly the most bothersome thing I've heard recently. Believe me, you would have to try very hard to make me feel bad about my gift."

"Huh." Ash certainly considered his 'condition' a gift, but hers didn't seem like one also.

"Anyway, you're searching for Cascadia. No, I haven't spoken to her today, which is a little worrisome, since we were supposed to finish our presentation

materials before tomorrow. I tried calling her but keep getting her voicemail." Ash felt himself slouching farther as she spoke. "I would guess that you're in a similar situation?"

"Yeah," he said quietly. "I've been trying to get a hold of her all day, and she won't answer. She didn't come home on time either, we live next door to each other, so I came here to check around at her classrooms to see if anyone had... heard from her either, but now..."

Gabrielle's brow furrowed as she thought. "That is most concerning. She is easily distracted, but usually punctual."

Ash sighed. "Well, I should be going, I want to at least check at her chemistry lab."

"Alright," she said. "If you don't mind, you could give me your phone number, and I'll call if I hear from her."

"Great, thanks," he said, then paused for her to pull out her phone, or get a pen and a notepad, but she just sat there with her concerned expression.

After a moment, she grinned. "Oh, I'm sorry, I'm going to memorize it. It's much easier than using my cell phone address book."

Ash told her his number, then took hers when she offered it. "At the very least," she said, "I'm available to chat for most of the day, if you need any encouragement. I remember Cascadia mentioning that we three all share the same faith, so I will certainly be praying for you to find her quickly and safely."

He had noticed the scapular around her neck, but was a little too distracted to register what it meant. "Thanks, I appreciate it. I'll have her call you when I see her."

"Thank you Ash," Gabrielle said. "God's peace be with you."

On his walk to the science building, Ash went over the conversation he just had. It was clear why Cascadia was friends with her, she was unwilling to let her situation in life bring her down despite the many reasons it could have. There was also her opinion of her disability as a gift, which had struck him during their talk.

Both he and Cascadia had talents they considered unique; neither of them had ever met anyone else who could do anything similar. Gabrielle was the only blind person Ash had ever met, but there were obviously others out there. She had a community of people she could reach out to, while for both of them, their community was just each other. Which made them extremely close, but also rather isolated. And, while their talents were not disabilities, they still had the

same effect. They still set them apart from the rest of the world. Their talents were often debilitating because of the extra caution each of them had to take around fire and water, respectively, just as Gabrielle had to be careful around busy streets and, well, most things.

This line of thinking was cut short as he arrived at the chemistry floor and found it empty of students. He walked around the narrow hallways to find the room she had been in earlier that day, or was supposed to have been in, at least. The room was still occupied by the instructor for the lab, a youngish red-haired fellow, washing some glassware in a basin-like sink. Ash inquired after his wayward companion. She had been marked absent for that lab with no prior notice.

Spurred by the suggestion of the librarian, Ash paid a visit to the campus security office, tucked inside one wing of the main administration building. The small office was hot despite the cooling evening outside, and the presence of an armed, uniformed officer made him feel like he was in junior high instead of college. There were no windows, and the crackle of a radio system periodically interjected into the conversation. The man behind the desk had close-shorn, dark brown hair and looked perpetually serious.

Ash explained his situation once again, and the security officer listened patiently despite his severe expression. He regretfully informed Ash of two things; first, they weren't able to review security footage for most of the campus because of a failure in the recording system, and second, even if it was available, he couldn't begin the process without an official missing persons report. Ash's excitement at having a new task to accomplish was tempered immediately by the officer's follow-up statement: such reports could only be filed after the individual had been unreachable for over twenty-four hours. He thanked the officer for his time and left.

Ash wasn't sure what to do next. He sat on a bench in front of the ivy-covered walls of the main building, collecting the scattered embers of his thoughts. The entire university campus was relatively small compared to other, larger institutions, but it would still take hours to search every building or place she would have been likely to go. He couldn't get much help from the authorities without following their procedures first, either. It seemed his little expedition had concluded.

As he neared the bus station on his walk back, he caught sight of the route that would take him directly back home, the yellow sign on the brow of the bus now bright in the evening light. Just behind it was the bus Cascadia used to get to the diner on their scheduled evenings out. That thought added a spark of hope to his fire, as well as the chance of getting something to eat.

GAYLE WAS wiping down the tops of the barstools in front of the counter, checking to see if any needed to be reupholstered yet. The diner and everything in it were showing their age, but that didn't seem to keep away the regular stream of customers. She dropped the rag into the bin behind the counter and got the warm coffee carafe ready for the few customers who enjoyed such a refreshment at this hour of the day. After she made one circuit across the length of the diner, she heard the front door open.

"Howdy Ash." Gayle's face quickly mirrored the concern on his. He didn't amble in casually, pick out a table by the window and wait like he usually did. He mumbled something that sounded like "Hi," then glanced around the room.

Gayle went behind the counter and wrote out a ticket for the number eighteen special, watching Ash as he walked all the way around the dining room, examining each of the patrons in turn, before picking a booth for himself which wasn't near the window and sitting down with a sigh. She didn't put the ticket on the rack for Jerry to start, instead it went in her apron pocket and she sidled up to his table.

"Howdy," she said again as she got near.

He looked up at her and tried to smile, but didn't do a very good job. "Hey Gayle."

"You're lookin' glum," she noted. "Everythin' alright?"

Ash considered just playing it off. Cascadia clearly wasn't here, but that didn't mean she hadn't been, or wouldn't be later. He thought back to each time Gayle had stopped by their table to chat with them, and not just the previous day. She was willing to invest in people, to care for them in a way she didn't have to. That meant he could probably trust her with his dilemma.

"No," he said, "It's not." He sighed. "I can't find Cas."

Gayle stared. "That ain't good." She leaned against the opposite table.

Her staying was a comfort, like she was helping him stay aloft when he should

be crashing. "Yeah," he said, and the rest spilled out quickly. "I haven't seen her since she left for class this morning. She isn't answering her phone, and she never came home on time. I just came back from the university and checked her usual hangouts, but she wasn't there. A friend of hers who she spends a lot of time with hasn't seen... or heard from her, either."

Gayle's mouth was tight, her eyes piercing.

"And on the way home, I thought of coming here, she might've stopped by at some point during the day, and maybe you or someone else might have seen her?"

She didn't change her expression. "No, I ain't seen 'er. I've been out here all day."

Unfortunately, he wasn't surprised. "Okay. If you see her, will you tell her to call me?"

"Course I will," Gayle said, letting go of the table and reaching into her apron pockets. "In fact, I'll do one better and call you myself in case I hear anythin'. What's your number?" She had a fresh ticket and pen ready, onto which she wrote his phone number. She wrote something else at the bottom of the paper, then neatly tore it off. "There's mine, too."

"Thanks Gayle," Ash said, as he stowed the paper in his pocket, and she put her half in the smaller apron pocket next to her lighter.

"Don't mention it, hon. Anythin' I can do to help."

Ash sighed as his stomach growled, his light lunch had been too long ago now. "Actually, maybe you could put in an order for me? I wanted to get dinner, but I also wanna get home in case she shows up there."

Gayle nodded, standing up straight, which made her seem even taller than usual. "Sure thing, I'll get you somethin' for the road. Just hang tight," and she was gone back to the kitchen.

Ash flipped open his phone again, no new messages. He needed to remember to charge it that night to be ready tomorrow. He had an odd thought about plugging himself in like a battery to regain his energy, but instead of electricity, he was pretty sure he ran on heat. Images of standing inside a campfire and sitting in front of an open oven distracted him from his primary concern of the moment, long enough for Gayle to come back with a takeout container and a sealed packet of utensils.

"There y'are," she said, "now you can get on home and I won't feel bad for lettin' you go hungry."

Ash felt a little better, knowing this was something Gayle was concerned about. "Thanks, how much do I owe you?" He stood up and out of the booth, reaching into his coat pocket for his wallet.

"Nothin', it's on me."

He frowned. "Really?"

"Really. You don't need to be worryin' about anythin' else right now," she waved her hand dismissively.

He pulled his wallet out, anyway. "No, I'll feel bad if you comp it, especially after that guy yesterday."

"Then don't," she said sternly, "'cause I didn't comp it, I paid for it myself."

Ash didn't know what to say. This had been a frequent feature of his day. "Okay, well, thanks. I appreciate it."

Gayle wasn't smiling in warm acceptance of the recognition of her charity. In fact, she looked more concerned than before. "Don't mention it. I'll let you know if I hear anythin'."

With that, he left the diner, and Gayle went straight to the back office and picked up her phone.

ASH SAT on the bus stop bench in the faded evening light. Under the tight-fitting lid of the container was a biscuit, over a sausage patty and an egg, with gravy poured around the outside. He ate most of it by the time the bus arrived. It sat on his lap during the ride, still warm and smelling delicious. He didn't recall having seen anything like this on the menu, and wondered if Gayle had prepared it herself.

Somehow, he ended up back at his apartment; the time between leaving the diner and unlocking the door slipped by. He sat at the table and finished eating his dinner, not knowing exactly what else to do. As if in answer, his phone notified him that Óscar Mario was checking in.

Hey man? Any news?

He typed out the response: *No, I didn't find her on campus. Going to the police station tomorrow morning.*

Good luck man. Let me know if you need anything.

Ash plugged his phone in at the charger near his bed, then tried to relax as he scraped up the rest of the gravy from the plastic bowl at the table. He felt tense,

strained. The food was good, but it was difficult to enjoy it. Was Cascadia hungry, wherever she was? Was she indoors, outdoors, trying to travel somewhere? It felt wrong to enjoy anything with so much uncertainty hanging over him, but that was just letting the despair get the better of him. That felt just as wrong as enjoying it. He sighed, exasperated. Gayle had been wise to encourage him to get home, he wouldn't have been able to accomplish much more in the state he was in.

He found himself inside Cascadia's apartment, to see if there was anything he might have overlooked. Her towering pile of unread mail didn't have any sweepstakes vacations or last-minute cruises, no letters from her family asking her to come back home right away. In a fit of insight, he turned on her computer, waiting as the modem screeched to life and sang its inscrutable song. He logged into his email account on the passing chance she or someone else might have been communicating with him that way. Her account was also open, and in the interests of being thorough, checked through it as well. This endeavor yielded nothing more than a coupon for her favorite online bookstore and an email from his aunt exhorting him to forward it soon to avoid an unspecified dreadful fate. He spent a while staring at the ghee recipe she had mentioned earlier. She had added a line of text to the top: *Thought you might like to have this for next curry night -C.* He would much rather have her over instead.

While watching the clocks on the wall, he wondered when the best time to tell her family would be. The fear caused his fire to gutter. What would he tell them? 'Sorry I lost your daughter, I'm still trying to find her?' Whatever he did, it would have to wait until tomorrow, the smaller of the two clocks informed him it was firmly the middle of the night over there.

Ash settled onto the couch for their nightly routine, which he wanted to fulfill even in her absence. If she happened to come through the door, frazzled and phone-less and tired, he could help her get settled in. If not, he would be praying the whole time, and he definitely knew what his intentions would be tonight.

As he went through the opening prayers of the Rosary, he asked Our Lady of Guadalupe for her intercession, in whatever way she saw fit. Wednesday was usually the Joyful Mysteries, but he thought it more appropriate to cover the Sorrowful, since he was in his own sort of agony right now.

Through the first decade, he reflected over the course of the long day for anything he might have missed, from seeing her off to school and his shift at work. The Scourging at the Pillar brought rumination over his lunchtime with

Óscar Mario, and the job offer that lost its priority so quickly. By the Crowning with Thorns, he was at the university, chatting with Gabrielle, and searching as best he could. His visit to the diner coincided with the Carrying of the Cross, his conversation with Gayle and journey back home. The Crucifixion symbolized the future for him now, what he would do tomorrow, what he would say to her family.

In the meditative space of prayer, he realized with certainty he had less reason to worry than he had thought. His previous fears of having to face Mr. and Mrs. Dewlenser with news of their missing daughter were less intense now. He had not, in fact, lost her. He had been striving all day to find her. He decided to call Aidan first, since he might have some insight into how to handle the situation.

Ash laid out on the couch, suddenly too tired to walk down the hall. Various thoughts kept him company as he relaxed; Matthew 25, he did not know the hour, he needed to keep his wick trimmed, though he never needed to worry about running out of oil. The Agony in the Garden he had just meditated upon; his spirit was willing but his flesh was weak. Less weak than other people's, but enough that he didn't rise from the comfortable cushions that night.

What happens next?
Will Ash find Cascadia?
Will he ever get a job?
Will Cascadia get a D grade?

Find out the answers to these questions and many more,
in the full version of Octave of Stars,
available at the [ZMT Bookstore](#)