



## And Then Again to the Next

### *Famagusta, 1974 CE*

In the half-red of sunset, he stood on the veranda staring out at the Mediterranean, his black-and-white striped trunks squeezing the meat of his lower back, his thighs. I tried to muster the enthusiasm I'd had for that form two years ago, even one, tried to resurrect the flutter in my stomach at that spray of hair between his shoulder blades, at the hard divide between his too-tan hamstrings and the pale, smooth caramel of the skin above, protected from the sun by that thin layer of stretchy fabric. *What's the point of working in a tourist town*, he'd purred once, stretched across the recliner on the veranda, *when you can't let yourself be a tourist every now and again?*

I tried to conjure up those old feelings, but it wouldn't do. Because no matter how irresistibly beautiful he was, he'd feel my eyes on him from the other side of the sliding door, turn, and pad toward me across the tiled floor of the living room too eager, too earnest, too obviously anxious that I wasn't in the mood, and straddle me on the merlot-colored couch, and he'd be right, I wouldn't be in the mood, not because he *wasn't* desirable, not because I *didn't* want him, but because he was so sure that I didn't anymore, so sure that he'd ceased to be desirable to me. And I'd fail to perform, and then he'd be right, I wouldn't want him, not like that. And he'd sulk, and the sky would go purple, and then black, and maybe he'd be there in the morning, but probably he wouldn't. Maybe neither of us would. I'd lived enough lives to know when the tide had changed. I only ever met him in doomed cities.

It was always the third year when I found it hardest to love him. Somewhere between the staling of the two-year bliss halo and the constant weighing of whether the differences were worth working through. Sometimes we made it through the third year and sometimes the city would fall first, and sometimes we'd break up, only to seek each other out like contrite wanderers in the dark of the desert who realized they could not, in fact, give up on water. Only for the world to end before we could patch things back together.

In Famagusta, that year, it was the air strikes.

### *Pompeii, 75 CE*

He tossed his head back in my direction from halfway across the bustling Macellum, arm curled around the basket of figs and onions at his hip. He waited for me to catch up to him before he acknowledged me. Later that night, feeding me one of those very figs, he'd tell me with a smug smile that he'd let me follow him for some time just to see how long I'd do it, that he'd known I was behind him all along. I'd blink twice, stunned, and stammer out a denial. But the truth would be that I hadn't known I'd been following until he pointed it out to me.

That day, as I walked across the Macellum with him, Hercules' hill loomed through the distant haze. When I was just a boy, the demi-god had indicated displeasure with our humble city, reminding us of his power by rattling the earth between his hands like a child angry at its toys, until columns collapsed and houses cracked and mothers and brothers and cousins and fathers were dragged, lifeless, from the rubble. Last year, a single belch of smoke had risen from the mountaintop, accompanied by a hiccup of a tremor, like a warning. But the day I met my soon-to-be-lover, as I took the basket from his hands and balanced it on my head, I imagined Hercules, and all the gods, smiling peacefully upon us from atop the heavenly hill.

He caught the basket as it slid from my head, laughing. This was only the second life I remember meeting him. So of course I had no idea what was to come. I thought I'd been given a second chance.

### *Bab edh-Dhra, 2353 BCE*

When the fishing boat bobbed in from the Dead Sea that morning, when he set foot on the salty shore that glittered in the already-burning sun, I knew what he had done. In the way his shuffling feet scuffed salt aside to reveal the sand beneath, in the way he stared down at his sandals to avoid my gaze although I knew he saw me there, in the way that he emerged from the boat first, and then lion-haired Laban emerged last, behind the rest of the crew, as though I wouldn't see, wouldn't remember the two had been in close quarters together, surrounded by the smell of salt and working men all these weeks as they traveled from our end of the Dead Sea all the way up to the River Jordan and back—in all these ways, I knew. He could hide nothing from me.

In each lifetime I meet him, some things about him are different, like his name, and some things are utterly unmistakable. This time a street magician, that time a museum docent, another time a fisherman, another time a carriage-driver. This life his hair brown, tightly curled. That life his hair short, coppery, wisp-thin. But always that flair for the dramatic. Always that crooked smile. Always that tendency to talk in his sleep, from full conversation to incoherent gibberish to the muttering of the words “I love you” each time I slip from our bed, and again each time I return. Always our instant, irresistible draw, our accelerated intimacy, our sheepish admission that *it feels like we've done this before*. Always my secret hurt that he can't remember how many times we already have.

Always his jealousy. His insecurity.

That day at the shore of the Dead Sea, before the abundance of fire from the sky, before the glowing, fair-haired strangers in the square at whose feet I watched my lover throw himself in the desperate lust of a man deserted, before self-righteous Lot used that divine prescience to spirit only his own family away while leaving the rest of us to the flames, before all that, I learned for the last time that it is always the most jealous man, the most certain you'll cheat, who takes another's bed behind your back. In the next life, I would see the signs early on, and I would know what to do to stop it. But in this life, I threw him out of my house with a divine wrath of my own.

### ***Alexandria, 365 CE***

He filled the hall with his music to the contentment of my honored guests, his long fingers flitting across the strings of the lyre, his delicate voice bouncing from marble wall to marble wall. Glint in his eye, exultant grin pulling the corners of his open mouth toward his ears. In my house, he played with more confidence than I'd seen in him at any amphitheater, perhaps because of the secret knowledge that, no matter how distinguished my guests, he was the most distinguished in this house, aside from me.

Yes, perhaps as penance for his past infidelity and as reward for my patience, The Fates had it that in this life, I was master of a house, and he my employee. A musician to whom I'd offered a higher bounty than his previous patron. It goes without saying that, within my home, where I ran things as I pleased, he was much more than an employee, but he did have an exceptional gift for music in that life, and largely because of him, my house had a reputation for its feasts.

Of course, there were fewer and fewer feasts like this, since Theodosius and his tidal wave of Christianity. The empire as a whole had taken a downward turn in those days, especially, with the rise of that religion. But we were still a Christian empire in name only, and that religion's strict sense of moral superiority would take years yet to gain any real foothold. We'd seen gods rise to prominence, rulers fall to decadence. Many still thought, in those days, we'd outlive Christianity, and though I knew better, I had my parties, and I maintained my house

as I pleased, and he shared my bed and even a portion of major decision-making as though he were the mistress of the house.

I had my own concubines, although my memories of other lives made it so I couldn't stomach the coercion of pederasty so popular at the time, and to his surprise I allowed him his own. It was part of my plan in that lifetime to see if taking away the possibility of infidelity would further crystallize our bond, further display to him that, while others could come and go, we would always come back to one another at the end of the day. In each life I tried something different. In this life, as was customary for someone of my stature, I had a veritable harem to choose from, and so I made no attempt to keep *him* for myself alone. It was only fair.

But therein lay the problem between us in that lifetime: it was always what I allowed. Though I kept no slaves, only servants, everything we did together he took with a desperate gratitude for the "master" with whom he'd found favor. He'd do anything I asked him to, and I was always sure he did it more out of a sense of duty than the unconditional love I pined for. He loved me, make no mistake, but never as an equal. And so, though we both had independence, and in that lifetime his jealousy was perhaps mitigated, it was largely because, I believe, he never felt he had any *right* to be jealous.

It was hellish. I came the closest I'd ever come to telling him of our past lives, of our intertwined futures, but afraid the spell would break and I'd lose the seemingly infinite opportunities I'd been given from gods-knew-where to get things just right, I cut myself short at the last possible moment. I was almost relieved when one of the servants interrupted our midday lovemaking to tell us, in a breathless panic, how the gods had pulled the sea out toward the horizon like a rug, leaving fishing boats alongside horrific sea creatures in the sand and slime.

#### *Ys, 434 CE*

"You want to know what your problem is?" I said in the dark of the tavern as I helped him up from the puddle of beer and broken glass and blood—his blood, and that of the three men he'd picked a fight with because they'd been "looking at me funny." Even fairy-made cities of cedar and gold and crystal, walled off impossibly from the sea, had their barfights.

I groaned as I hefted him up, dazed as he was, so much dead weight. He was rather heavy in that lifetime, rather hairy, and being strong lent his usual theatricality a certain brutishness that grated on me while making me, in spite of myself, weak with lust. It wasn't the first time he'd stuck up for me when I wasn't sure I needed help. We made a strange pair in that life, him a burly blacksmith, me a waifish druid in a city where being a druid had begun to fall out of fashion. But it wasn't what you might think; that was a simpler era, where fairies consorted publicly with humankind, and two men could walk freely through the streets without fear of violence or harassment. It was my being a druid that made people cast wary glances at one another, even outright move to another table if I sat too near. But having to protect me gave him a wonderful confidence in that lifetime. I think it was good for him.

On his own two feet at last, he swayed briefly before plucking his forgotten goblet of mead from the nearby wooden table, taking a swig, and belching.

I continued, "Your problem is that you'll do anything to get my attention, but you've already got it."

"And *your* problem," he replied with a good-natured smile, mead sloshing from his goblet as he gestured toward me, "is that you think you know me better than I know myself."

I opened my mouth to protest, as was my habit with him, but the words wouldn't come. What could I say? Didn't I?

The bell tolled in Ys for the last time, that same bell whose ghost people would hear on a calm day for years to come. He finished his drink.

**Osaka, 2083 CE**

The elevator sunk two hundred and thirteen floors, and my stomach pitched in spite of its smoothness, its silence. Perhaps he was following, sinking down in an elevator just seven stories behind mine, praying he'd catch me before I drove away. Something told me that he wasn't. We'd paid for the full hour of counseling. Surely he was getting the last twenty-five minutes worth of our money to process what had just happened. After all, we didn't always go together.

When I got home, I ran my hands under the chemically cooled water of the bathroom sink, splashing it on my sunburned face (I was having to replace the UV-blocking resin on the windshield with greater and greater frequency, in those days). I mumbled over and over into the mirror as I did so. We would weather this. We always weathered it. We would, we would, we would.

*Take every moment as it comes* was one mantra I'd written on the bathroom mirror with the AR mapping only my contact lenses could pick up. *Remember the mistakes of the past while leaving room for a future you can't imagine* was another. And then, of course, the old proverb, *Fall seven times, stand up eight*. Mantras: the recommendation of my therapist. Ours. Ancestors only knew what *he* had mapped on the mirror that I'd never see. Ancestors. A funny set of spirits to believe in when you've lived a hundred lives, but Shintoism had survived here when everything else had fallen prey to the cynicism of a world slowly dying, and perhaps there was something to be said about that. How many of us were our own ancestors without even knowing it? I certainly couldn't have been my own; I'd tried to be with women a handful of times in past lives, and unsurprisingly, it hadn't worked. Hell, I'd *been* a woman a couple times, but I'd never been able to conceive.

But I'd done it. I'd told him. Stupid, stupid, stupid. I'd told him. Why had I thought he'd believe me? I guess enough research had emerged that we had the vocabulary to talk about reincarnation, about past life regression, with some statistical certainty. I'd been flipping through a book about it in the white, round-edged waiting room of our therapist's office. I'd insinuated enough to our therapist about how I knew things about our relationship, our past, our future, that I'd been *reasonably* certain she knew what I'd been hinting at.

So I blurted it during our session. And they'd both blinked, slowly. And she'd asked for clarification. And I'd given it, in painstaking detail, carefully, with the certainty of someone who's had an accumulation of centuries to understand what was happening to him and was explaining it to children. I ignored the slow widening of their eyes, the jaws clenching and then slackening, the brows furrowing and then going loose, like they'd given up; I chalked it up to how much information their one-lifetime minds could take in, to the possibility that they were experiencing their own awakenings. He stood, when I finished, and then sank slowly back into the plush chair beside mine. Lifetimes later, I'd never forget the words, spoken more to himself than to me: *I should've gotten help for us sooner*. I remember that day as the first, in any lifetime, that I had any doubt as to the truth of my condition.

I don't know what to say. I had to do something. It was our fifth year together in that life. Things between us were permafrost-thin.

The cool chemicals of the sink usually worked wonders on the swelling around the eyes, but it was in vain. Salty heat ran down my face, and I couldn't stop it, and I kept repeating, *Fall seven times, stand up eight*. But I'd tried to stand, really stand, once and for all! Stupid! I

shouldn't have. There were some things no one could know. Some secrets you carried to the grave, and then again to the next.

When I heard the front door to our apartment whoosh open, then close, I shut the door behind me, but he came in anyway—something he'd never done in any lifetime, violate my privacy—and beyond the mantras written on the mirror I spied his face: stony and unreadable, I thought, that of a man who had decided his husband was crazy and would subdue him until he was taken away.

He placed his hand tentatively on my shoulder, like a child reaching out to pet a capybara for the first time (they existed only in petting zoos by then), and said, "If you know it's going to end up like—"

"I never know exactly how anything's going to—"

"Please. Just let me finish. If you know it's going to end up like this—something *like* this, why do you come back to it every time?"

I straightened from my slouch, pushing up from each corner of the sink, and turned to look at him directly, not through the mirror.

"Do you even have to ask?" It wasn't as if I had a choice, as if I hadn't invested eons in our love, as if I could wake up in another life and see that crooked smile as I walked down the street and just keep walking. And then, afraid of the answer, I asked, "Wouldn't you?"

He looked down at the tiled floor for a murderously long moment before he closed the gap between us and said, "I think I would."

Something awakened in me at the uncertainty in his voice, and I kissed him, desperately, needing him. It was the first time in months I'd been the one to initiate intimacy between us. All my lives, I'd been so sure things were inevitable between us, so sure that even if I lost him, he'd be back again in another life, and he wouldn't be able to resist me. The idea that we had a choice, that *he* had a choice... For the first time I was relieved of the burden of holding all the power.

I won't say I realized just then what a complete ass I'd been, that I understood in that precise moment how it was no wonder he was so insecure, when I'd been engaging with him each life like our relationship was doomed from the start. And I won't say it wasn't. Doomed, that is.

The duration of that life can only be described, though I hate to use the term, as a slow burn. It wasn't the wool-pulled-from-over-the-eyes, suddenly-everything-made-sense sort of life I might have imagined. No. Too much damage had already been done, too many gaps that, no matter how well we thought we understood each other from that point on, were too late to bridge. But we held on, along with the other millions who had other things to worry about than a revelation in couple's therapy. We held on until the onslaught of hurricanes became too much even for the electromagnetic steel that had reinforced everything a decade before, before the unbreakable dams broke, before the sea came in and the nuclear waste and the oil and all the other poisons of the ocean claimed body after body brave enough to try to leave the safety of the skyscrapers, while the rest simply starved. In past lives, I'd been eaten alive by the guilt that, if I'd just said something sooner, if I'd just told him I knew we were destined to meet in doomed cities, we could've fled, but I'd been paralyzed by the fear he wouldn't believe me or the fear that we'd leave the city only to be claimed by another disaster, that no matter what I did it would always find us.

In this life, at least, I was assuaged of the guilt. Even if I'd said something sooner, we both knew there was nowhere else in the world to go.

*San Francisco, 1906 CE*

I wasn't rich enough for one of the earthquake cottages in Franklin Square, so at first I drifted west to Presidio, where I floated like a specter for weeks searching for him amongst the tents, eerily crisp, arranged in neat rows by government agents. Then there was the Golden Gate Park shanty, which was rather rudimentary by comparison, rather dodgy, rather less safe. But at least the walls were made of wood instead of canvas. He was nowhere to be found there either. Meanwhile they pulled out bodies and bodies and bodies from the debris and the ashes, and I scoured the papers they left us in scarce supply until finally I saw his name among the dozens of other names, and I didn't know what to do. It had been an exceptionally blissful two years that lifetime, then a moderately rocky third, followed by a solid fourth, and before the earthquake hit I was sure that, finally, we'd gotten it right.

Hours after I found out he was dead, fingers of fog crept through the narrow margin beneath the door to my shack, and I hung myself from the low ceiling with what must have been two inches of space between my toes and the floor. I was eager to start over, to get this life over with and start the next one so I could see him again. Well, wouldn't you know, the rope was too short and the chair I jumped from was too low to snap my neck, so for some time I flailed there, gasping and sputtering and choking, certain I'd made an awful mistake. As I jerked about, I heard the roof begin to creak, all tin and two-by-fours, and I wiggled my weight around all the more ardently, thinking, *All right, if I make enough of a ruckus, perhaps the roof will collapse, and I can forget I ever dreamed of this suicide nonsense and move on with whatever crummy life I have left in California.*

And then it did, it collapsed, but it did nothing to help me forget about *this suicide nonsense*. Rather, I looked up in time to see a sharp corner of the roof rush toward me. Then nothing.

Let me tell you, that was the last time I'd make that mistake. It took me three lonely lifetimes to see him again, tragically long lives uninterrupted by premature catastrophe.

### ***Famagusta, 1569 CE***

A common misconception is that reincarnation, of all things, happens linearly. You die one year, you are reborn in that same year. Not so. I have come to rest in one life only to be born a millennium and a half before

When you've lived the lives I have, you learn not to trust déjà vu. There's something awful about realizing you've lived in a city before, at its end. Living a stolen life in a place you know, centuries later, will meet its demise. Knowing its distant future and, therefore, knowing the future of this life—if Famagusta is fated to fall four centuries from now, you won't meet him for the fourth life in a row. You come to understand this when you realize where you are, and that you were born here before, in a future in which the city fell. And you're tired, yes. Tired in a way few could hope to understand the word.

And then, walking along the beach nostalgic for a past you'll live hundreds of years later, a past where sweaty bodies litter the sand baking in the afternoon sun, you see a man kicking rocks at the edge of the sea, and he looks back, smiling his crooked smile, and you realize some cities are destined to fall more than once.