

Final Workshop

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Chapter 1

A cool breeze is ushered in by the tide, continuing past where the waves stop to lap at the shore. It's a gentle reprieve from the unforgiving sun, relentless in its efforts from where it hangs overhead.

Leonidas wipes the sweat from his forehead, tilting his head back and reveling in the wind's colder caress. Beside him, his mother fans herself aggressively and watches Olympia chase a seagull down the beach.

"Don't go too far," she calls after her. Giggles are the only answer they hear.

His favorite days are just like this, all together, stranded down by the shore. Here they get to be somewhere else entirely, governed by the water and blistering heat.

Olympia stumbles over the uneven sand, falling a very short distance into the ground. Their mother watches with Leonidas as she lifts her head from the sand and laughs. Olympia hardly ever cried, even as baby. From the ground, she starts throwing handfuls of sand towards her bird, until it finally spread its wings and flew away. "Bye, bye," she calls after it.

Leonidas knows he was not as easy to care for. He was crying more than he wasn't and was surely the cause of many sleepless nights. But his mother never complained. She called him her little hero every morning, after waking him up with a kiss. But he's not a hero. He's smaller than the other boys in town and can't beat any of them in a race. His mother tells him to be patient and that he's only ten, but even his cousin Aris outpaces him. He's only eight.

"Leon, come over here." His father beckons him over, standing ankle deep in the water. Leon smiles, standing and racing over to join his father in the tide. The water isn't cold enough to be refreshing, but Leon's grateful for it anyways.

“You want to try and catch one?” His father extends his fishing rod out to Leon. It’s a little large, but he’s determined to hold it, gripping the handle tightly with both hands.

“You can do it, Leon!” His mother whoops and hollers from the sand. He smiles back at her excitedly. Leon’s seen his father fish a hundred times, but the motions are unfamiliar when his father walks him through them. He struggles to cast the line, and he feels a familiar dark presence brewing within him. But his father tells him to keep trying and he eventually gets a far enough toss. And then he waits and wait and waits, grinding his teeth when no fish deign to tug on his line. His mother hasn’t been cheering him on in a little bit and Leon can feel his already feeble patience waning.

The tide pushes and pulls against his shins, rocking him back and forth. He’s never been good at waiting, but why should he. Waiting is a fool’s game. His arms tremble and throb as he struggles to hold up the heavy rod.

“Ugh, I can’t do it.” Leon shouts, throwing it down into the water. His father scrambles to find the rod beneath the murky, shallow water and Leon thinks he hears his mother gasp in the distance.

“Leon?” A light voice calls. He finds Olympia standing towards the shore, standing in shallower water than Leon and his father. Her big brown eyes are bright, lighter than either of their parents, and full of astonishment. They seek answers and are never disappointed by what they find.

Embarrassed, Leon sighs and sags his shoulders. He stares resolutely into the water at his feet, desperately fighting the growing lump in his throat. His eyes burn with unshed tears.

He hears Olympia grow nearer to him, wading through small waves. They might seem big to her, Leon thinks. She ducks her head beneath his, invading his line of vision with her curious face. Leon can't help but laugh a little. She smiles back at him.

"Leon." She says again and draws her hand out from where it was hidden, behind her back. She extends it to him, offering him a tiny, wriggling fish. She had its tail pinched between her little fingers and was smiling ear to ear.

"Did you catch that yourself?" He asks her, filling his voice with delight. Her smile grew and she nodded at him proudly. He laughs, picking her up and walking towards shore with her mom. Eyes glistening with tears, Leon says, "Mom, Olympia caught a fish!"

His mom's frustration with him melted away at the sight of his red, watery eyes. She smiles softly at Leon, understanding his frustration in a way that only a mother could.

"Oh my! Did you really?" She asks her daughter.

"Just a little one," Olympia tells her, holding it up with pride. Leon holds her similarly.

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That night, Leon couldn't help considering every possible way Olympia surpasses him. She talked sooner, she walked sooner, she ran sooner. She even caught a fish before him and she's only six.

What if great men never cried? What if Leon never outgrows his shortcomings?

He tosses and turns, troubled by insecurity. If he fell asleep, it was only for a moment, before a vision of his deficiency stirs him awake. That's how he heard his bedroom door squeak open, even with Olympia snoring across the room.

Leon squeezes his eyes shut and evens out his breathing, hoping to spare his parents from the severity of his agitation. But he doesn't hear the door squeak shut or the tell-tale footfalls of his father checking to see if he's actually asleep.

Slowly, Leon opens his eyes and finds his mother standing over his bed. Her eyes are wide and haunted, staring into his, but dead of any recognition. Leon notices a knife in her hand, a big one that his father uses to filet the fish he's caught.

"Thaleia?" His father calls down the hall. Leon's mother doesn't move, tears streaming down her face.

"Monster," she hisses. Leon sits up and slams himself up against the wall, kicking his bedding towards her.

"Mom?" he whimpers. The woman who kissed him goodnight a couple hours ago flickered across her face, but only for an instant. More tears pour from her crazed eyes.

"Thaleia?" Leon's father peaks his head into their bedroom, waking up when he takes in the scene before him. "Thaleia, what are you doing?" He asks, looking to Leon for information.

Leon shakes his head, now shedding a few tears of his own. Their father's attention darts over to Olympia for just long enough to make sure she was still asleep, before returning to Leon.

"Terrible things," she says, voice wavering. She raises the knife towards Leon, pointing the blade at him. "How could you?"

"What are you talking about?" Leon sobs. "Mom please." She inches the blade closer to him.

"Stop," his father says as he makes a move towards him. Leon's mom whips around at his approach, coming face to face with him. "Thaleia," he softly wheezes. Her eyes focus on his pain-ridden face, lowering to where she has impaled him on her weapon.

“No,” she gasps. She grabs him, letting go of the knife, trying to help him stay standing. The weapon clatters to the ground. Blood pours from his wound. When his body finally gives out, she lowers him to the floor, cradling him in her lap. “Demetri,” she calls, caressing his cheek. She cries out when she realizes he isn’t breathing. Thaleia begs and shouts and holds him closer and closer, as if willing her own life into his body.

“Mom?” Leon says tentatively.

“Leon?” She asks, voice raw. She spots him, standing purposefully far from her, glancing at his father’s body with fear and confusion. “What happened?” She asks, holding his father’s face in her hands, kissing his lips, and begs him to return to her.

“He’s dead.” Leon moves towards her.

“No, please, he can’t be,” she wails.

“It’s okay,” Leon tells her.

“No, it’s not. Nothings okay.” Her eyes dart to the knife laying beside his body. She’s covered in his blood, laying in a pool of it.

“It’s going to be okay,” Leon repeats.

The blade hits the ground for a second time. A quiet gurgling sound fills the room. And then a thud. Hot blood spills from Thaleia’s neck, gushing onto Leon’s bare feet.

Leonidas stands above his parents' bodies, as they empty onto his bedroom floor. His face is wet with tears, but he is no longer crying. His icy blue eyes shone with newfound resolve.

In the slightly smaller bed across the room, Olympia was continued to snore away, unaware of chaos ensuing around her.

Chapter 2

It's been 10 years since Leon and Olympia's parents died. Olympia describes moving in with their uncle and their cousin Aris. They're preparing for Aris' birthday, as he is turning 18 and plans to join the military. Leon has just returned from his two years of service. Olympia goes out to the beach, where she has a ritual (that has not been hashed out yet) she completes on the anniversary of their death. An unknown girl surfaces from the water, calling out her name.

Chapter 3

A first-person dream sequence about drowning and foreshadowing through strange imagery.

Chapter 4

Olympia is checking on the mystery girl when she wakes up. She has no memories, except the dream described in chapter 3. Olympia likes her and wants to take care of her, noting that their mother had similarly unusual dreams once. Leon is suspicious of her and doesn't want to be responsible for her, but Olympia convinces him to let her stay with them temporarily. Leon's uncle is the general of their island and will be attending the summit in the capital, that is held every five years. He tells Leon that he's taking Aris, to prepare him to take over his role as general one day. Leon will stay home to watch over the girls. The mystery girl gives Leon some weird advice regarding this situation.

Chapter 5

Aris gets injured in training and can't travel to the capital. Leon gets to go in his place and insists that Olympia and the mystery girl go with.

Chapter 6

I'm swaying.

Back and forth. Over and over again until my stomach churns and my head spins. I peel open eyes. I'm laying on a deck. I plant my hands onto the wood planks and push myself onto my feet, despite the aggressive rocking. I can't seem to find my balance. It feels as though the world is trying to toss me overboard. I'm dreaming again.

I experimentally take a step forward. My boot leaves the ground, heavier than I remember it being. I lift my left boot next. Right after left, I stumble forward. My hands reach blindly ahead as my heavy feet clomp across the deck. Left. Right. Left. Right.

I'm wearing yellow boots. They aren't gold, like currency, but soft and subtle. Like sunshine. I've never seen such pretty shoes before. I've never owned anything so nice. And yet they fit like a glove and feel like a memory.

I've been walking forever, dragging my feet across this infinite deck. My steps grow slower as my feet grow heavier. Railing. I'm searching for the railing. I stretch my arms even further, fingers straining, when they finally come into contact with smooth wood. I grasp at it desperately. The rocking doesn't show any sign of stopping and my feet are so tired. Standing has become so difficult.

I pull my body tight against the railing, squeezing my eyes shut, trying to forget the swaying my body has grown so sick of. Remember the breeze, I tell myself. I see her floating through the air, white cotton dress floating away from her figure, concealing her legs beneath its billowing skirt. I feel her caress my face with cool, salty fingers, soothing my furrowed brow.

My eyes drift open, and I am face-to-face with the dark, rough sea. The waves angrily crash into one another, vengefully rocking the ship back and forth. The water appears black, as its futile fight for dominance disturbs any chance of a reflection upon its surface.

I hear a voice, casted from somewhere in the dark, beyond the turgid waters I face. I lift my head. Rough water becomes land in the distance. A very large island covers the horizon. The mass of land continues on in both directions with no end in sight. The sandy shore glitters in the moonlight, enveloping the land in an eerie silver glow.

I hear the voice again, calling out to me. I can't make out what's being said, but I see where it emanates from. In the distance, a boy stands on the shore, facing me. He's too far away to be recognized, too far away to be heard, but I know what he wants. Come here, he beckons me.

Who are you? I want to call back. My lips don't part. He reacts anyways. The boy points up at the sky, face lifting up, skin illuminated by the silver moonlight. My eyes follow his direction to the abnormally large moon, who is taking up far too much space. It's much too close. I wonder if the moon might fall down to Earth, sinking my ship, and sending me to the bottom of the angry sea. It won't. I know deep down that I must survive this trip, but only to meet a worsen fate. Save me, I beg the swollen moon. Her beautiful silence is the only response I get. She knows there is so saving me.

The boy on the shore, I remember. I look for the waves and the land and the boy, but my view has changed. I now see trees, foliage, and hills. There's no ocean in sight. My hands are empty and uncertain. How did I get here? My eyes seek out my boots, but my feet are bare, sinking into the wet sand beneath me.

Over here, the wind whispers. I see the boy again, much closer than before. He smiles at me warmly, expression wrought with endearing mischief and youthful naivety. His eyes shine with adoration, matching the color of his pale blue chiton. There's something painfully familiar about his face, but I don't know him. I don't know him.

I peek back over my shoulder, looking for a glimpse of the ship I was just upon, but come up empty. All that's left behind me is empty water, calmed by my departure.

Hurry. The boy regains my attention. This time, he's holding my yellow boots. Smiling impishly, he holds them up, as if to entice me with their presence. I start walking towards him, wanting to laugh at the silliness of it all. A strange little boy is luring me towards him with a pair of beautiful boots as bait. And it's working.

And then he's running. The boy is running, further inland, swinging my beautiful boots at his side. Wait, I think. Wait for me. I start running after him, pumping my legs as hard as I can. I hear him giggling to himself as I slowly start to gain on him.

The scenery around us is beautiful. We run past tall trees and lush meadows, weaving our way higher up what feels like an inclining hill. To my left, the tall hill reaches an abrupt end. The ground drops off and I can't imagine the cliff-face that exists below. The boy never strays close enough to the edge for a glimpse. And yet his eyes, constantly darting back to greet me, flit towards the edge. They look where he won't go. They ask me, do you remember? Do you remember what's down there?

I'm almost an arm's-length away from him now. He leaps and bounds ahead of me, like we're playing a game, and I'm supposed to know how to play.

Suddenly, a streak of white runs past me, past the boy, and up the hill. A beautiful stallion, as white as freshly fallen snow, rounds back down the hill and gallops towards us. The

boy reaches his arms out towards it, without slowing his pace, and jumps onto the horse as it runs past him. Momentum propels the boy over and onto the stallion's back. He tangles his fingers in its mane and flashes an electric smile back at me, as if he's challenging me. He's daring me. The boy takes off on his steed, leaving me far behind on my own two feet.

My heart pounds in my chest. My lungs burn for more oxygen. My feet ache. A new horse runs past me. And then another. And then three more. And suddenly I'm running amongst a stampede of horses, none of which look alike. They come in a variety of natural and alarmingly unnatural colors.

One of them in particular catches my eye, as it slows to match my declining speed. A golden mare pitifully acknowledges me, eyes filled with understanding and empathy. As my sprint eventually slows to a weary jog, she mimics my crawling pace, approaching me carefully. I feel her hesitation, but it's misplaced. She isn't scared of me. She doesn't want to scare me.

I reach out, carefully bridging the distance, and petting her head softly.

I'm riding the mare. I feel her strong muscles working hard beneath me, propelling us faster than I could ever run. Her mane is unfathomably soft in my grip. I would admire its texture further if I wasn't desperately trying to keep my balance as she races through the woods. We catch up to the crowd of horses in an instant, riding amongst them across the leveling ground. My steed expertly navigates through the trees, bushes, and roots that plague our path, maneuvering us to the front of the herd.

From here, I spot the boy again. He's standing alone at the base of a tall laurel tree. He's precariously to the edge of the hillside, suddenly unafraid of any peril lurking past the edge. As I grow closer, I notice a change in the boy. He's older. He's grown, both in height and muscle, now

possessing the body of a man. His youthful face now has a hint of facial hair, hiding the new sharpness of his features. The realization is overwhelming and bittersweet. The boy—now a man—smiles at me bashfully, almost embarrassed to have grown up. Tears prick at my eyes. I miss him, but I don't even know him.

Come on, he waves me over. My steed sprints towards him, but the distance between us shrinks at a painfully slow pace. The man sits down on the ground, dangling his feet over the edge, and facing what waits below. I don't want him to fall but feel no fear for him. I know he's safe. His dark blue tunic disappears as he pushes off the edge and descends.

My mare takes me to the edge. I finally get a glimpse of the rocky cove that lives below and find no sign of the boy. I glance up at the towering laurel tree. It's branches and leaves glitter in the moonlight, appearing silver against a backdrop of green.

I know I have to follow. I need to know.

My golden horse turns her head and looks at me, eyes full of understanding. She steps towards the edge quickly, leaping off of it. I lose track of her immediately. My stomach lurches as the wind screams and my body plummets towards the rock-ridden water. I squeeze my eyes shut and brace myself as I plunge into ice cold water.

I flail and kick as I tumble underneath the tide. My lungs burn for air, but I can't find the surface. When my head starts swimming and my body no longer has the energy to keep going, I let go. The water turns warm as my body sinks and eventually hits rock bottom. When my lips could no longer resist the cries of my tormented lungs, they opened, but only sweet air slipped through them.

When I open my eyes, I realize that I'm laying on the floor of a rocky cavern. The walls around me are surprisingly smooth, as if they'd be sanded down. My clothes show no signs of ever wet. I inhale deeply, savoring the relief of having full lungs.

I'm wearing my yellow boots again, as well as a long, white peplos. The cavern around me isn't very large. Dozens of scattered candles reveal the limited extent of the small, empty chamber. A lonesome archway is the only artifact enclosed within the room. Tens of tiny figures are carved into the marble, all the way around from one end to the other.

I walk away from the edge of the chamber, approaching the opening of the arch. But, when I round the side of it, another girl is looking back at me through it. I jump back. She jumps back.

The girl is beautiful, with chestnut curls that cascade down her back. She's wearing the same dress as me, but in forest green. Her expression is one of shock, but her eyes tell a different story. They are deep brown and warm and speaking to me. Welcome home, they whisper.

I smile at her. She smiles back. I walk closer to the arch. She walks closer to me. I stop. She stops. I lift up my arm. She lifts hers as well. I drop it. She drops it.

Are you my echo? I think.

I'm your echo, her eyes speak.

What do you want from me?

Want from you.

What do you want?

You.

I approach her, growing closer to the precipice of the archway. She follows in suit. She's smiling at me, like she's done so a million times before. A tear rolls down her beautiful face. She

mimics me as I raise my hand up and point a single finger towards her. I drift it forward until they're a breath apart, and then not even that could separate them. As soon as any semblance of warmth flitted across my fingertip, a wall of bright, white light shoots from the marble archway, filling the entryway like a door. I rear back, shocked by the brightness.

I squint my eyes, straining to find the girl within the door of light, but come up empty. I begin to approach it, as my eyes grow more accustomed to it. Tentatively, I reach out my hand, quickly pulling it back after grazing the light. I expected to feel some sort of heat or a slight burning sensation. It didn't hurt. I try it again, allowing my fingers to linger for a moment longer than before. Still, no pain. I want to run away, escape this Godsforesaken mystery cave, but I can't bring myself to. I feel like I'm somehow needed by the unknown contents of this bright light. Haphazardly, I thrust my entire hand in, watching as it disappears. In awe, I let it drift further and further in, until my arm has disappeared past my elbow into the light.

Then I feel something. Hands grapple at my forearm, yanking me in. I quickly resist, pulling back against the phantom hands. I brace, planting my feet, and grasping at my arm with the hand that is still my own. The enemy hands don't loosen their grip, latching on to me with painful determination. Their sharp nails dig into my flesh, tearing at it with every tug. I scream, having to endure a burning pain every time I pull back against the light. I can only imagine how my arm will look when I finally free it. How the shredded skin will fall off the marred muscle, blood gushing from the cracks in my exterior.

What will happen to the rest of me if I don't succeed? I imagine a monster, with long talons and sharp fangs, ripping my flesh to shreds and feeding on my organs. I pull harder, fighting against the pain, hoping to avoid becoming a monster's meal.

But suddenly, the pulling stops, and I fall back onto the ground behind me. I'm swaying. The hands gripping my arm follow me, as the same girl from earlier tumbles out of the doorway of light.

I check my arm, searching for any remnants of my pain and find none. The skin is smooth and soft, clear of any blemishes. I'm sorry. I gently caress the traumatized skin, even knowing the gesture is entirely unnecessary. You did good, I tell my arm.

Laying beside me on the ground, the girl gently grabs my forearm. Her eyes, welled with tears, bore into mine. They're searching. They're apologizing. They're pleading. I cup her face with my hand, caressing the soft skin of her cheek with my thumb. Her dress is now an offensive shade of purple, something I know she would never wear willingly. The portion of fabric across her stomach has a small red blemish. It's growing. Bigger and bigger. She tentatively presses her other hand into her stomach, winces, and pulls it away to reveal its matching shade of red. Her eyes tell a new story now. They're afraid. She didn't expect this.

I gently roll her body towards mine, peering over her side and at her back, where a small dagger is deeply lodged. Before I could react, the girl reaches her hand back and rips it from herself. Instantly, an alarming amount of blood starts to pour from her body. More blood than I've ever seen before. In a panic, I press my hands to the wound, vainly trying to stop the bleeding. More and more blood gushes from her, regardless of my efforts.

Why? I roll her back onto her back, wanting to remember her lovely face. Why? Her eyes begin to fade, as the color drains from her skin, and the life leaves her body. I can't watch her die. I cup her face and press her lips against her forehead gently. I turn my attention back to the still glowing archway. It needs me to find her. She is the key.

Can I save her? I wonder desperately, feeling how limp her body now lays within my arms. Her eyes are still wide open, but the gleam of life within them is long gone. The door of light blazes with understanding. No sound emanates from its mysterious glow, but its reply echoes within my mind.

Hurry.