

"A love letter and a goodbye"

(Re:)Imagine

You *are* an artist, right?

Young in visions, taken by fancy, a heart fit to burst and a deep infatuation for bottling all that enraptured her.

Back where each and every moment was vivid, bright and full of life uncapturable by any medium.

The whistling wind, a clear view of the stars, wildflowers in the meadows; a quiet idyllic town.

Everything she could have ever wanted from the moment she could hold a brush to sitting easel by easel, working away in her own little universe.

Those days mean everything to her, but they have long since departed. It's all the little things, now few and far between.

What remains is not nearly enough to fill the absence left behind.

Vacant eyes and a heart with nobody home, she's losing her edge. The fog rolls in, settling into her bones.

She can feel it keenly with each passing day, greyer yet greyer. Further away than you've ever been, you can only fantasise now about what portraits will be hung at your funeral.

You cannot simply lay it to rest, even when each ruined piece taunts you with your so-called talent, so-called skill. You refuse to let it go, to let it get to you... No matter what.

This is everything that I am, this is all I have left.

Or: Kass longs for the days when her muse was there.

Act 1

It's an early morning drowned in fog- and here Kass is, sitting primly on one of the red bench seats like a useless ornament or a senile guard dog. She'd be titled: "The Lady in Grey". A statuette, perpetually frowning amongst the eager art enthusiasts. They chatter like cicadas as they crowd the most popular of the works in droves- Boasting their knowledge and expertise of a subject as if they could read a painter's mind, proclaiming intent as intimately as one would gush about an old soul. Kass was rather fed up, impatiently awaiting attention she had a sinking feeling wouldn't find traction. Crowds ghosting over a masterpiece for the carnage left behind by an amateur. This was supposed to be *her* night, and yet, here she waits.

She sucks in a sigh-

She shouldn't be bothered, this is the opportunity of a lifetime and here she goes complaining as if she's owed anything at all. Ravens in droves watch, perched up on rafters. Underneath her seat a black dog whines softly.

The venue drowns her out, and she closes her eyes. Oh how she dreams of being able to stand among the greats, instead of wallowing in a graveyard amongst the rot. She drifts off there, to the slow ambiance of her dreams falling to dust.

--

The burning husk of her cigarette falls from her mouth and Kass hisses as the ash burns her chest, she swats it, swearing as she tries to get the charred remains from her sweater. She sighs, taking off her glasses and massaging her temples. She's been unfocused lately, spacing out even while sketching references for her latest works. She brushes the dregs off her newest disappointment with practiced boredom. Usually she had the urge, the drive.

There was something about bringing the tip of graphite to the itch of sketchbook paper that cleared all doubts for her. Not quite release but more akin to satisfaction, reassurance that this was what she was born for. It filled her with an animated fervour for more, to see something she was working on make sense, something she was good at. She could pick up the craft whenever she fancied and get absorbed while the world just passed her by.

The dim lighting of the gallery backroom was good enough for her doodles. Letting her frame the old, dusty and preserved works as they sat patiently waiting their turn behind stage. Though lately things haven't been going her way.

No matter how hard she tried- her harsh black lines were still unpolished, jagged, ugly. Imperfect. Nothing she ever drew looked complete- Not with colour, nor with her skill. It never could compare to when inspiration struck, when the idea burst forth and her hand moved before she could even think to act on it. Her vision could never be matched and no amount of argument to the contrary would ever change that. To call her sketches 'life-like', as she'd heard others comment in the past, was no doubt misplaced praise. It was an insult to the beauty in the world that surrounded them.

She can see herself from the outside looking in, clear and taunting. Herself a much younger girl standing stock-still by the school windowsill, watching her snatched notebook with rapt attention,- *Don't react, don't cause trouble, don't lose your temper again.* -blocking out the squabbling of her classmates as they scrambled to see what secrets lay inside. Shrinking into herself with clenched fists- **don't** -over the confusion, shock and finally praise as the morning rays seared hot, creeping up her neck. She's forced then, to shyly display her pride and joy, forlornly wondering if she could ever take her sketches to a canvas. To breathe water-colour life into their jagged forms.

She used to dream of displaying her works in her hometown's one and only gallery. A modest gift, generously donated to them many years ago.

She'd accomplished it years ago. But still, it had meant more to her than any other gallery offers she'd been tempted by in the last few years.

She sits there, as her shift comes to a meandering close, dreaming of the day she'd see her very own mainstay masterpieces among the greats she's come to respect during her tenure.

"Kass?"

'Maxine Alice St Claire'. "Miss Claire" to her students, "Alice" to her coworkers. But to Kass, she was simply "Maxine".

"Your art-" Maxine says uncomfortably, standing unusually tall over Kass from her seated position.

"You haven't been able to submit anything at all lately. What's going on?-" she says, as if this wasn't a variation of a recurring conversation they'd been having every week in the days leading up to the deadline. "I know you're much better than this, I've seen you at your best, you're amazing-"

Kass drowns it all out, she's told herself the same things, she doesn't need Maxine of all people to tell her what she already knows.

...

Kass keeps quiet as Maxine expresses her concern in the same snivelling tone she always used with her. The way a caring parent would to their own child, projecting onto her. Kass simply nods vacantly and murmurs a halfhearted excuse. She'd resisted clicking her tongue then, as Maxine put on an even softer tone that she refused to listen to, the one of empty praise, expectations and encouragement that never gave her any help at all.

She affirms once again that she'll keep trying, that she'll be good and play nice. Thankfully Maxine seemed satisfied with that little, enough to lay off and go away. The older woman nods a little to herself, confident she'd done everything right before bidding her a good evening.

Kass knew she felt obligated as the protege of her father and she hated it.

...

Act 2

Staring into the soulless eyes of a half-finished, sterile, white tern she had sketched just yesterday was giving her a migraine, settling heavily in the back of her skull. She'd been so proud of it the day before, sitting pretty by the leafless remains of a withering tree, allowing the light to filter just right so she could draft her interpretation of the bird. More complete with each passing breath.

It perched crooked, wings ruffled in preparation for a flight atop an old brick wall with a decrepit chain fence. The subject, usually dopey, clueless and a little bit beautiful at any other time is now something more. Dynamism and challenge, there's a story to be brought into existence.

A light buzzing catches her attention, and when she sees it, her goodwill, all gone. Lifting her sketchbook, lining up to where, a short distance away, the ruined corpse of a raven, its black coat stained red with carnage, lying still. Flesh peeling and feathers

missing, beak wrenched open in a deafening cry, struggling to vomit ants and flies alike. But what had truly stood out to her was how the light had faded from its eye, dull and empty.

“They look identical,” she murmured.

With a groan, Kass all but tossed her notebook (a plain-but-handsome black on its cover) onto her bed. It sailed over her target and tumbled, nailing the landing like a long-retired gymnast, sprawled open on her floor. The scene deepening her frown ever so slightly. It was just so frustrating. The inside of her various faded notebooks, she'd discovered, had more in common with a morgue, or the hospital where her mother worked. The more pages she thumbed through, the worse off she realised she was. It was why she had just now decided that she was going to pointedly ignore the overflowing trash can with torn papers flooding the floor, the many paint brushes that had rolled to their six-foot ditch underneath her bed. It was why she was no longer on speaking terms with the canvas she'd torn up and left out by her door or the abstract interpretation of what could have once been its stand.

The only thing she feels like she's been working her way towards now are wasted years.

It's laughable, thinking about how hard she was struggling to produce anything of notability now, when it was so simple before. She'd never once thought she'd ever be rendered so incapable of her own craft. She never expected that, years later, she'd still be staring at the same mediocrity in her pieces to this day, nor that her anxiety had blossomed into a searing irritation over if she was really good enough that had her spasming arms incapable of even the basics. Once a bump, now a long and winding road that only she could understand as maddeningly fruitless. It was easier back then to not care so much about what she made, instead doing it for the sake of improvement. The simple joys and simple thoughts. Now, frustration and insecurity dogged her every action. Christ Almighty... She's jumped through the same mental hoops time and time again, wondering now if her work is no less worthy now that she was putting more thought into it than she ever had, analysing each inch of every piece.

She could feel her negativity chip away at her marble confidence, thoughts swirling like the murky water left behind after cleaning a brush. But she couldn't lose her focus now. She cursed, chastising herself internally. Kass pulls on her sweater with only a huff to spare for her dramatics, pushing her glasses up her nose. Stringently making to leave

her dainty little homestead, turning left towards town to brave the light chill of an autumn morning.

Wind unfurls around her ankles as she makes her way along the winding dirt track, trying to trip her with mischievous howls of laughter, her substitute to where she could have been walked hand in hand. Rotten leaves crunching underfoot the rebound for laughter and conversation. The hills stretch across the borderline, coveting the sun for themselves as light splattered their grassy surfaces covered with flecks of gravestone. History and future of the town, laid out for all to see.

--

The old steel electricity pylons vibrate with a rumbling hymn as she approaches, the glorified windchime pays no mind to her peering up at it. Limbs strong and thin, propping itself up on a web network of barebone supports. Its wires still hang suspended in the air, stretching thousands of kilometres all for nothing. The wind howls across these plains, raking through the unkept grass, clawing at the valley's locks. Kass strolls through the graveyard, she's not out of breath, but she can still tell that her lungs strain a little bit more than they used to when hiking. She passes several more pylons, each of them in a state of disrepair, whispering at her as she goes. She walks alongside rusted train tracks, slowly being claimed by the grass and weeds, blowing gently in the breeze. Metal sinks into the earth in great heaps, like an abandoned toy set designed for titans. Some of them have been given more livelier coats than decaying brown. Floral patterns dominate a majority of carriages while signatures adorn abandoned cars, overlapping and overlaying so many times over that it's impossible to decipher who once stood there. Buried under history and having lost all meaning. The bare trees fit right in among the wreckages.

Kass chambers aboard an unloved train compartment with a grunt and lets the sun bleed her closed eyes. She leans back with a thud, laying on her back and watches a murder of crows pass under the glare peaking through the open roller door. Kass fumbles lazily for a smoke, and breathes out an ashen sigh. She stays, dazed and settling into a high, daydreaming that she was taking a ride on an operational train, being taken far far away from the familiar landscapes and the walls of her childhood home.

She awakes with a smokey splutter, coughing wildly. That'll teach her to fall asleep with a lit cigarette smoldering in her mouth. She can practically taste the disappointment her mother's eyes would radiate if she could see her now. She curses and does her best to

navigate her way back in pitch black and moonlight, helped only by the weak torch of her phone.

...

“Kass, I need a favour from you-” There's a slam of a door, chatter loud in the background accompanied by the frenzy of nurses and doctors walking too and from. “I've been asked-” Kass can practically feel her frown of disdain “-to return home. Yesterday was busy but they managed to get someone to cover my shift today...” There's a pregnant pause as her mother waits, the one who's willing to take help, but unwilling to be the one to ask for it, just like always.

“Yes mother, I'll drive you home, I'll be on my way now.”

Her mother, out of her medical scrubs, clambers into Kass's truck with a sigh, sagging in her seat with what Kass assumes is the weight of several sleepless nights. The older woman looks truly exhausted. The hospital always has to force her to stop working and go home, but by then she's well past having the capacity to drive without falling asleep at the wheel.

She doesn't turn to face her daughter. They ride in their usual silent tension, Kass tapping a familiar rhythm on the wheel. They pass through the barely developed town. Kass's eyes catch on a dead raven on the road.

*Kass you should be thinking more about your future, a job outside of the valley, I can't believe you're still here, you're being irresponsible- **Don't end up like me.***

The fire cools and sizzles to nothing, she cannot be bothered gracing her Mother with any response that isn't practiced.

...

Act 3

Kass approaches the lonely gallery atop a massive slope. She's spent a good portion of her life exploring these halls, so it was a bit of a dream come true to work here. Even if she's just a gallery hand, setting up the layouts of each exhibit. She thankfully doesn't work much, so she has plenty of time to paint and try and fail fucking miserably at her latest pursuit. She makes her way along the final stretch, a royal grey carpet of gravel. The Gallery matches everywhere else, a little worn around the edges, a little old, and maybe, just maybe, a *bit* shitty if she was feeling affectionate on any particular day. Right now the sun coaxed its face in a way that caught its good side. Kass was sure if it could, it would be puffing out its chest proudly, foolishly believing it stood the same as when it opened: its singular glory day. The walk from home is strenuous, but she's gotten quite used to it over the years. She's never been the pinnacle of tardiness, but she's never late enough for it not to be brushed aside. When she enters, a quiet hush, a soft sunbeam through the curtains, her home. Portraits she used to pass by as a child still hang by the entryway, pillars of her wonder standing tall to this day. Solace amongst all the decay. She sits among the murmurs, the awe on passersby's faces as they wander through, gazing at the same works that were deeply ingrained in her being. She gives herself a minute, staring longingly at the walls. Even if she'd already been offered her own exhibit there, it doesn't feel like she deserves it. One day, she'll hang something she can die happy with, among the others she calls masterpieces.

She takes off her glasses and closes her eyes, letting her head thud against the wall, her favourite works halo above her. God she could really use a smoke right now.

...

She's perched up in front of yet another easel, and already she's dreading the completion of her own work, like her hand is moving separately from her and she can only look on in horror as the painting comes into wretched being. Her hyperactive mind wanders, everything else feels like it's in slow motion... She closes her eyes at the oncoming headache and dreams of lush green fields, deep blue summers, overcast springs, crimson sunsets and luminescent sunrises. She blinks, staring out the window like a widow waiting for her soldier to come back home, no longer sure of what she's supposed to be looking for, or what exactly's missing.

Something is.

She's gripping her paintbrush far too tightly, she knows, and no amount of twirling it with nimble fingers is convincing her at all that she shouldn't apply more pressure until it yields. Kass's eyes bore into the canvas with disgust, she can barely recognise what she's even done, the beautiful starling framed by sunset was anything but. It doesn't even look remotely correct - calm strokes came out jagged, they don't mesh well in the slightest, like her brush left spiny needles in place of elegant feathers, puncturing each other in a way not dissimilar to two hedgehogs rammed together. The colours are all muted from her overmixing, watery and dripping and blotting. The sleek, black bird, donning its plastic shine, looks more in pain, struggling to stay aloft while waves of orange, purples and reds try to melt away and escape the canvas in shame. She's warped it beyond repair.

She feels small and stupid looking at it, like a child playing around and smearing paints without a care while everyone looks on, waiting for her to stop making such a mess.

Her reference image looks so much better, so much more complete than hers that it makes her want to tear it asunder. It wasn't even that she didn't think anything looked complete anymore. She wasn't able to complete anything, period. Yes she *finished* pieces, but they weren't *complete*, not in the way she wished for them to be, like she'd gotten halfway and lost heart right at the finish line, fading lustre leaving her with bleak monochrome no matter how bright the vision. This had been going on for quite awhile now and she was nearing the end of her rope, she could get into a flow state just fine, she was certainly not out of ideas. She was more driven than ever to finish it, spite driving her to try even harder just to prove the treacherous part of herself, the one wrought with doubt, wrong. Yet nothing changed. It just didn't make any sense. She was so tired, and honestly so pissed off with herself. Why couldn't she just do this one thing. Quite literally the only thing she ever did.

To make matters worse, no one had a single useful thing to say to her. 'Try different subject matter', 'Try working at a different time of day', 'Try sticking with a theme', 'Try adjusting your style', 'Try letting someone else decide the particulars so you care about it less personally', 'Try taking a break', 'Try this', 'Try that', 'Try fucking everything why don't you?'. She was bumbling around, dancing to everyone's tunes and more fool her for bothering to listen as they watched and laughed at the miserable zoo animal.

She drew the line however, at moving away from watercolour, with a snarl.

A soft tune is what gets her to look back at her work, she'd been lifting her brush up to, teasing its end for little more than a few seconds before letting it drop back to her side, maybe mixing her pallet a little or selecting a new colour absentmindedly. She glances at one of her two housemates she's formed a semblance of a connection with; Lena, who as always, backlit by a golden glow, floral scent and sun-kissed skin gives her a brilliant smile. Looking for all the world the picture of content, returning to her own painting tittering like a hummingbird. Kass couldn't help but think it was reserved all for her. Lena would always start humming whenever Kass lost focus while they painted. It was a way to ground her, to get her to stop overthinking. It confused her to no end. She hadn't thought that they are especially close, nor so much a confidant that she could recognise her discomfort or be bothered to do anything in response. She wasn't exactly the most friendly nor outgoing roommate. She wasn't ever sure how to react, but usually landed somewhere within the ballpark of embarrassed.

And so she's left with Lena always sitting a little too close, leaning in to invade her personal space. The girl she hates more than anything bar her failures, smiling and grinning like they're sharing a secret when she bumps her shoulder with her own to get her attention, who seems hellbent on caring far more about her than she does herself and treats her like she sees more in her than Kass believed possible, in the same kind of way that never failed to make her feel special. As it always seems lately, Kass doesn't know what to do.

Unlike her, the corner of the crafts room that Lena occupies was not horrendously littered with reference works, sketches, and inane ramblings; ideas and experiments she could try. Rather, it was surprisingly immaculate. Despite her relaxed manner towards art itself, and the casual way she acted and composed herself; she treated maintaining her station with a lot of care. She never used references yet still managed to produce accurate, picture-perfect paintings (usually of insects and flowers, almost always species not native to their region). Watching her work always put a little sinking feeling in her chest, a persistent thought that halted all logical processes and made her question if she was really an artist, whether she was cut out for it in the first place, whether she'd always be fuming in the shadow Lena cast, a natural talent that breezed through anything without barely a second thought or careful consideration. Lena had previously expressed how the only reason she'd taken classes (under Maxine no less) was because she had an empty time slot and it seemed like it could have been fun. She didn't seem to care that overnight she'd discovered she was an artist, a damn good one at that. She didn't seem to care that doubt never entered her mind at every decision she made, nor had to consider how her family would look at her, if at all.

Kass wasn't jealous.

Her shoulders tense as she feels a hand placed on her shoulder. She knows who it is as it's the only person who would even bother to go up to her, to be blind to her seething and decide not to steer clear. It takes all she has to not round on Lena with fury, and just scream. She doesn't trust herself, instead fixating on one of the many small flecks of white that she'd forgotten to fill in as Lena's other hand (without her permission, but she'd given up at protesting otherwise) goes to fluff her sleek black hair.

"Are you even trying to follow your own reference?" she jokes.

...

The mirror looks back at her with bored disdain and badly restrained rage. She's trying her damndest not to break anything else lest she scare her flatmates again. There's a yellow tinge to their bathroom, and fluorescent lights bore into her. She doesn't understand what she's doing wrong, why things aren't going her way and why no one seems to understand what she's dealing with. She can understand somewhat the concern about her, but none of them seem to care about what really matters, and that's producing a piece truly worthy to display in galleries far and wide. She's had offers, she's proved herself to be an artist, but this one thing she cannot do, she cannot create anything except monstrosities. She had to take them down from her room and hide them from sight, as they are painful reminders of what she cannot achieve.

Her pulse thunders in her head, lightning crackling in her ears. It's a different kind of sterile, a faint yellow tinge permeating the room, white tube lights reflecting off the countertop, leaving bright spots in her boring black eyes. Despite how harsh it all is, despite the way her brain knots itself taut and tighter, she can't ignore her calm expression swallowing her attention. Her eyes glaze over, teeth grinding down ever so slightly, knuckles white and flexing shakily with the sweet promise of *something*. The purple sweater lent by Lena (she insisted. "You really don't have many cute clothes huh?") feels too big on her, leaving her burning up. Hot around the neck and suffocating, like a perturbed hand is tugging her back by the collar, a child in need of discipline. She doesn't know why she's not showing even a sliver of emotion. Her bunched shoulders find a way to tighten even further. She doesn't know why there's no sign of activity behind her blank expression; this wax mask covering her face makes it so hard to feel. Her legs strain against themselves to keep her in place. She knows she goes to great lengths to keep to herself, to be left undisturbed. But even when she's all alone, she can't do anything? Not even so much as a frown?

What was wrong with her?

She can't feel her limbs, the bright blots in her vision shudder and bristle as her bottom lip wavers. She hates this. Expressing herself used to be so cut and dry. Her art was her release, and now without her lifeblood, her oxygen- she might as well have not been born. It wasn't fair, she didn't know what the fuck was wrong with her, how could she? But there had to be something... How else could her emotions be interpreted? Yet she was in sound mind, she knew this rationally. She was only struggling with art and art alone.

The stares and curiosity, an ant under a microscope. She didn't give a shit anymore. There was no indication that she was ill in any sense of the word. She knows this, even as the theories continue to worm themselves to the forefront of her mind day after day. Through her locked jaw, she's mercifully allowed the satisfaction of spitting at the blurry Kass trapped in that mirror. Ribbons of saliva run down her face, it's not her- she reasons, it's how she looks to others and she despises it, the dull inscrutable girl. She's hit by the full weight of that stare, and she feels something inside her recoil. No wonder people talk about her behind her back so freely, she never responds. No wonder they think she sees herself as their better, she pretends they don't exist. It's not her at all. Without her art... It's not what she wants to show.

She tears her eyes away from the sight. It's not enough, all she's done is made a mess that'll fade, nothing lasting. It's not enough to bury the hatchet with whatever is bothering her so deeply. Of course it's today, just had to be today. She wants to scream instead, to thrash - wrestle control of herself back. But her composure won't let her, she's rigid, staring directly up at the flickering lights until her watery eyes ignite and burn. Blooming hurt welcome. She closes her eyes and takes a deep breath, as her mind shivers in anticipation.

She barely registers the moment her fist slams into the wall, even as white dances across her clenched fist which has just started to break out red at the knuckles after the clumsy, desperate swing. She still doesn't feel anything. Not even the second time, as she tries harder to provoke her body - goad it into finally reacting to the world around her. It's only with the third swing that she feels something recoil, and the pain rushes eagerly to greet it. She looks down at it curiously, running her other hand over it to feel how malleable flesh gives and pushes, nerves flickering. She can feel her grin, baring her teeth in a victorious grin. Oh how she's waited. She was going to relish-

"Kass..?"

With her eyes wide open, the light assaults her eyes, and she has to blink back the flickering spots. The mirage disappears completely after a hard blink, fading to nothing. She catches the eyes of a second girl in the mirror, looking very much caught off guard. Kass whirls around, adrenaline pumping and forehead pounding, she can hear herself breathing heavily.

She clutches her wrist, the one that was sprained in that little world of make believe, and if she tries hard enough, she can feel a slight phantom pain. The other, shorter girl doesn't say anything as she watches her, doesn't move actually. They stand there for a few minutes, each one daring the other to speak, but none of them muster up the courage. Looming in Kass's peripheral vision the girl shifts her weight from leg to leg awkwardly, unsure of what to do.

It's her other housemate, Lillian, a self-proclaimed witch who practiced behind closed doors. They didn't talk much, mostly because like her, Lillian was too absorbed in their practice to be seen outside of her room.

"You okay?"

Kass half-nods, unsure of what to say. The other girl leaves and Kass thinks that it's time for her to have a smoke, that is until she comes back with Lena.

Lena smiles, bright and radiant and Kass can't help but return a gentle one back at her. The sun offers her hand, and the moon takes it after a slight beat.

She'd happily bathe in her embrace for just a little while longer.

She doesn't mind, she decides as Lena fusses over her. Instead Kass straightens, and lets the other girl take her away, She'd happily bathe in the sun's embrace for just a little while longer.

With her vision still blurring at the edges, she leaves without fanfare.

She doesn't remember making the tea steaming in front of her, but she's glad she did. Her arms shake as she raises the rim to her lips with her good hand and lets the liquid soothe her, cradling it to warm her hands. Her flatmates chat in the background, Lena laughs airily at a joke Lillian makes. It's been an emotional day, she's still unsure but

feeling a lot better than she did in the bathroom and that's all she really cares about right now. She relaxes into the faint scent of earl grey and leans up against the kitchen counter, content for now.

...

Lillian announces that she's leaving the valley and it opens up a pit in Kass's stomach. Lillian was a highly successful poet and a driven person who hated living in the valley just as much as Kass loved it. But to see her leaving, when she was so hopelessly stuck here, caused jealousy unfettered. Why is she allowed to leave, why is she able to leave when it feels all too much for Kass. What was the real difference between them, Kass was just as successful as Lillian in her respective craft. She too had offers outside of the valley that would lead her to leave for good. And yet, she stays, against all reason. Call it whatever you like, but she had unfinished business here and she cannot let go. And so, she'll watch her leave the birdcage, with the door wide open, and fear the outside as much as she fears never being able to paint again.

...

Act 4

Days are all painfully different, the leaves fall, one by one, the sun rising and falling as she sits at her easel for as long as she possibly can, producing the same soulless mediocrity she's begun to hate, and some small part of her has resigned herself to. Smoke clings to her clothes like a second skin. The acrid smell that draws her mothers condescending mirth burns. But she doesn't care, it twists and curls, settling peacefully atop all her possessions like dust, cloying in her mind, her hands are just a little steadier as the cigarettes burn lazily. The world stills, the colours pop just a little bit brighter, there's a light at the end of the tunnel. A bit of clarity to all the haze.

Her eyes rove over to her latest failure. She sighs. Well, she supposes she can't just leave it there. Her room was messy enough as it is. It's enough to get her moving across her room to open her closet. The tarp she has over several pieces beckons her over, ready to lay waste to yet another. But there's something nagging in the back of her mind that has her second guessing. Does she really want to continue like this? If anything she's just going to repeat the same mistake again. The ratio of paintings she's been able to confidently claim as her work is pitiful compared to how many she has gathering dust, and it's not getting any better. "If it's not working, you need to do something about it, anything. Try something new, never stop exploring your options." It's a lesson she'd promised to take to heart, and she's well aware she needs to do something. She just doesn't really know what that 'something' is. In any case, she really

can't stand being in her dusty room any longer. She leaves the painting on her bed. 'I'll deal with you later'.

She lovingly packs away some art supplies and takes many many drags as she makes her way to her new haunt.

Just a little bit more now, you're so close.

--

The wind whistles as she makes her way through the town. There's a huge part of her that begs her legs to give out, to sink deep into the earth and be still. But another that decides she no longer walks, but *glides* through the concrete streets like she's navigating old spiderweb, with the same ease as recalling the gentle grooves of her own palm lines. Hiking boots, a warm jacket and suitable trousers, she's ready to get away from all the incessant noise swarming like gnats over the populace.

The roads have fully given way to hiking tracks and Kass veers toward the rightmost one, steadily snaking its way upward. Goaded on by currents and struggling breath, drowning out the exhaustion. "The Summit", or so it was called, was merely an outcrop that overlooked the town. Despite the height the name implied, it wasn't all that impressive, though it still had a vertical drop that spelled certain death in big bold lettering. Though the spot is known by all, even advertised as one of the few notable locations outside of their abnormally large graveyard; Not many bother to take it on. Nice for a cursory glance at the skyline, stargazing on a clear day, a snapshot that might be deleted when scrolling through thousands far more interesting. But to her, it takes on a wondrous shine. The litter of empty bottles and cans, the lack of birdsong, the wilting plants, the crispness of the air, the noxious smell of pesticides. It was still her favourite spot. Kass sits on the old overturned log sanded down into an even seat. Her bones creak in tandem with the groan of woodland remains in a way it never used to in her memories.

She pretends not to notice.

There are still uneven patches of grass where she used to set up her easel. It was always perfect for some peace, her quiet glade. The view from the Summit was no less impressive today: Grey and overcast, following with her eyes the sharp dips and peaks of the mountainous basin that keeps them all secluded from the outside; the garish sinkhole town shrouded in shade. Though, one new addition soured things. Like a boil, a new department store rose bloated and engorged, a pus yellow blight among the more muted pallets of its neighbours. The first of many growing pains to come she fears.

The streets are emptier, more local shops have closed down, forced to yield to the slow onslaught of commercial deals behind closed doors, powerless to stop the festering smog that will surely choke out everything that made this place home to her.

This is her reality now, watching on helplessly as the town shrivels up in front of her. She misses when it didn't feel so lifeless, when she was still in the dreamy little town she grew up in.

She lets the frustration sit long enough to drain from her limbs and lets it flow thick and heady. She's stood at the edge, the old sign goes ignored face down in the dirt. With nothing else to take her attention she peers downward. It stretches on, looming and shifting. She wonders what it would feel like to take the plunge. To be tossed and wrung by gravity and wind. To tumble in freefall, to just let it happen. But her longing is no desire to catch a kiss with the ground beneath her feet. So instead, she takes upward, leaving behind all rational thought as the wind rakes her hair. It claws at her but cannot find the purchase it needs to drag her back to her place on the ground. Nothing resists her in flight, there are no limitations, nothing at all can stop her in freefall. Only the open sky and whatever horizon she wishes to see.

She spends a long while up there alone.

And like always, she comes down quietly.

...

Her uncle sits cross legged across from her, dead animals hang outside to drain. 'Pests Only' he'd assured her. She barely recognises the old soldier in front of her.

"There's something coming," He tells her while he takes her out for one of his hunts. He'd come back from the battlefield completely changed after one campaign. No longer a perpetual grin on his face, no more jokes on the tip of his tongue. Just cold and gaunt and devoid of all humour in a way that Kass didn't fully understand. "The spirits are restless." He continues "The land feels disrespected, and it will take no prisoners."

...

Act 5

Kass opens her eyes, hands still clasped in prayer. She wasn't religious by any stretch of the imagination, but the shrine she was kneeling before was said to bring good luck and prosperity. And boy could she use some of that right now.

Here in the glade, surrounding the small shrine with the bronze dog statue, trees grow inverted, roots soaring high into the sky never to bear any leaves or flowers, yet the sun seems to smile upon the small sanctuary, lending ample light during the day. The moon even favoured it too, candlelight mingling with silver cast by the celestial body.

She prays. One day, maybe she can make it out of the Valley with her greatest works in hand, moving far far away and never looking back.

Kass dances her way through the abandoned and the decrepit, she doesn't care anymore, everything's a mess she cannot hope to clean up all on her own. She's tired and angry but somebody should be. She explores all the little nooks and crannies of the valley that she loves, the bunkers in the hills provide plenty of inspiration for her latest project. The tunnels winding for miles around. "Death Valley" It used to be called. Man made, created by a series of bombing runs during a war many many years ago. She wonders if that's why all things come to die here.

She wanders through the ruins, torch still in hand. She can almost see the old souls, still lost and damned, doomed to stay anchored to the place they died. She draws and sketches the battlefield they once fought on, one that has been overcome by fauna and flora, bloomed into something beautiful once, but the cycle of life continues and all things wither eventually. Maybe it's time for her to move on too.

...

Kass and her extended family visit her Great Grandma, her uncle stands with her, hand on her shoulder as she witnesses the real time degradation of a psyche. Her great grandma in all her frail strength raving on about how their family is cursed to fall before their times, spittle flying as she tries to screech at a decibel above what she's now capable of. It's sad, her great grandma was one of the few relatives that she happily showed her paintings to in her youth, who fully supported her dream of being an artist. Reduced now to a conspiratory skeleton who could only wail and thrash in all her frail rage. She was the one who taught her to never back down from what she cared about, to not take shit from others and to stand tall and proud. Now she stands tall in the hospital bed to yell at anyone she could see, so blindingly proud of her heritage that she can't help but remind everyone of her roots. Kass remembers her fondly and tries not to let dementia take away the love she has for her still.

...

Act 6

When Kass wakes up, it's earlier than she usually is. It's the faint sound of her phone ringing that has her alert. She waits for it to fade back out to silence, and a little longer for her heart rate to settle. She crawls on her hands and knees to retrieve it from beneath her bed from when she first threw it. She's got plenty of voicemails waiting for her, and an eye-watering number of missed texts.

"Hey, Kass, it's been a hot minute since we've seen you. I know things are stressful for you around this time of year-"

"-you're never at home, your mom says you're always out and doesn't let us inside-"

"-the scholarship means a lot to you, and we're cheering for you, you know? We've been friends for-"

"-being difficult again, I don't see why it's hard to you know, let us know you're even alive-"

"-unno, are you *sure* this is what you even want to be doing?"

"We're worried about you. *I'm* worried, you've never been this dis-"

"Maybe you should give up on this, it's hurting you more than anything-"

"You *can't* keep doing this to yourself, if you keep pushing us away we're going to stop trying at some point-"

"Forget about it all, there are better things you can be doing with your time, do you seriously want to be stuck in this shithole-"

Kass grits her teeth at each one, they just didn't get it, they didn't understand. Everyone who made it out successfully, leaving her, the struggling bluejay unable to fly on her own. Of all people, as much as she loathed it, they knew what it was like. But the only difference is they made it, those assholes she had stood far above, they found a way

out, but not her, of course it was her, she would never get the recognition she worked for, instead it's those who have the luxury to fuck about, of course, why wouldn't it be lucky bastards like them. The fuck did they think they were, to even talk like they *knew* how she felt, how it **was** like going up against everything and *still*. *STILL*. fall short. Her friends, the ones who were just as if not more stuck than her- they didn't have the same kind of drive she and the ones the ones that after leaving, never looked back have. weren't talented, weren't even good at what they did, not better than her. How dare they think otherwi-

She creeps over to the door, faded and peeling with age. There's new creaks on the floor, even as she treads the same route she's done forever. Placing a hand on the door elicits a shiver. She hasn't dared go near the study with her mother around. It would be far far too awkward to unpack everything with her, and honestly speaking, they'd just go down in flames like usual, clawing and biting, barbs and insults, their same petrol dosed routine sparking conflict again and again. Too much vitriol for a place so sacred to the two of them.

The door swings open without so much as a squeak, and Kass's heart seizes in her chest. It's like she's seven again and the sound of birds dance through the window, the old inherited bookcase full of maps and books on botany, architecture, birds and wildlife litter the shelves in a heap, corners worn and torn, dog eared pages peeking out, yellowed with use. Maps big and small cover the walls, circled and marked, for all intents and purposes; ruined, but not to the owner, instead well made use of. Grand sketches and portraits crammed into the remaining wall space above a much humbler desk, reaching all the way up to the ceiling, looming over the small lamp and scattered paints and pens. Scavenged frames of all sizes, shapes and colours present even more confusing subjects, watercolour mostly, pretty much every piece an abstract masterpiece.

The room had lost its lustre by now though, dust covers every surface and swallows the faces of a majority of the hanging pieces. The room is dimly lit in the autumn hush and certainly no birds song is heard. Kass smiles sadly, she spent a majority of her childhood in this room. Her earliest memories were of colouring on the floor, sprawled out on her stomach without a care in the world.

She fetches a key from the key tray they have by the door, it's one that hasn't been picked up in a while. But she thinks it's a good time as any for a second opinion. The door creaks open exactly as it did in her memories. So too do the same floorboards

she'd hop across as a child. She feels warm coming in, it's a little bit stuffy and the air is quite stale, but she's not really concerned with anything aside from the bundle lovingly wrapped up by the desk. Kass feels her heart clench up and moisture on her eyes as she takes each of the precious gems out of the sack, she admires them one by one. All watercolour and whimsy, beautiful and bright, a little abstract in key places, all to highlight joy and childlike wonder. Some of these she knew were painted in a single day, while others had taken years and years of iteration before they had been finished. She takes her time drinking it in, committing each brushstroke to memory and knows, that this is the kind of quality she wants, it doesn't matter if any of her pieces are used in schools to teach fundamentals, nor if they feature in some gallery. She wants to create for the sake of creating. She wants to paint for those she cares about, to make them smile fondly. She's not sure if she can, and that singular doubt scares her more than anything, the burning desire in her that wants to unleash all she is upon that canvas doesn't mean anything if it cannot evoke the response she wants, if no one can see anything beyond if it is a good painting or not then she's failed. And she has been, for a long time now, to evoke the same feeling she'd had when she'd started picking up her pencil when an idea came to mind as a child, and when she had been learning how to paint for the very first time, eagerly and brightly lapping up the information with a smile so beaming it hurt. She shakes her head, and wipes a sleeve over her face, she shifts some of the paintings over to the side, pulling out the very last one she's yet to look at. She knows what it is, she's hesitant, it wasn't exactly meant for her eyes, but she wants to see more so she pushes past her worry. It's a lot simpler than any of the other paintings, there is nothing abstract about this portrait; a young girl with a shy smile, she has her eyes, the same colour but less round and more sharp. Her face is the opposite, rounder than hers, less pointed but the same shade of colour as her own. The most notable things are the pitch-black hair; long and flowing down her back with some of it cupping the right side of her face. She's in uniform that Kass is sure isn't made like that today, but she looks... Happy. Content and is posing rather rigid despite capturing the teasing look in her eye that told her it was for show, a regular schoolgirl posing as a model for the painting. Kass takes it all in, the brushstrokes selected with absolute adoration, the blending of colours that practically bleed with care. The painting seems downright minimalistic, but Kass shudders to imagine both how much time this painting took, as well as how many times the artist attempted this exact painting with little success. All the tweaking, adjusting and resignation to starting over.

It's admirable. She's not sure if she'd ever be able to do anything like that.

It hurts.

She quietly tucks the paintings away distractedly, and without a word, she leaves the room and locks it, just how it had been before.

She returns to her own trove of paintings and she can only think of one thing; she needs to wipe the slate clean, only leave what she's happy with. She starts mentally weighing which ones she should leave but quickly tires. There's a lot, and there are lots of merits on either side of the decision, she blinks tiredly, a little lightheaded as black spots make their appearance. She sighs, she was overcomplicating things, there was a reason why she'd covered *all* of them, she didn't want to see any of them anymore. Her mind was made up, and her trip to the garage solidified it. She spies a few tools left around, cluttering a workbench that no longer had a purpose beyond laying stuff on it to free up hands and frowns. Her mother would never leave any of her work equipment lying around she knows, but she does here. It's all stuff she has no idea about, beyond being in service to her care. She's content with never knowing. Kass ignores the grey, steel toolbox already open in favour of crouching down and pulling out a rusting red one with peeling paint and a creaky latch. She takes pause as she gingerly wraps her good hand around the handle and pries it out with precision that would have made her mother raise an eyebrow. She knocks the lid shut with her splint hand.

—

She wields anger just as much as a hammer as she meticulously grounds the trash into splinters and dust. She purposely works fast, not letting any kind of pause stir sympathy for any of her pieces. She needs a fresh start, what she was doing wasn't working and she needs to do something new. Keeping the baggage around was a good way for her to keep herself miserable, it was time to cut it loose.

So she keeps at it, panting as sweat ran down her neck, she'd removed her sweater before starting, but she'd underestimated how she'd heat up and she let that minor annoyance turn into haste. Her vision was a little hazy, but that helped her more than hindered, the white squares of canvas could hardly be mistaken for anything else. Her split arm hung awkwardly as she swung crouched and crawled in some cases over her pile, barely bothering to sort out the destroyed from the soon to be. The black spots were back yet again, bigger and bolder as she wiped the sweat from her brow, she growled, annoyed at them too. And pushed harder, using all of her strength in the swing, there's a satisfying punch as it punctures, she flips it over with a giddy grin to inspect the damage-

Her heart wrenches as the bright eyes of a bluejay stare at her in betrayal. It's not perfect, if anything it's rough. But it has more heart in it than anything she's done in years, and more than anything it's the first painting she'd found worthy to keep, if only for the way her mother had told her she was proud of Kass. Its shattered wings wouldn't be able to carry it anywhere, the self-inflicted hammer holes smoked as if bullets had torn through them, she's almost surprised the red spray of blood isn't depicted. Or maybe they were the tears she refused to shed. She spent a long time tracing the painting with her fingers, she couldn't see past the blots, but she could feel the life she'd poured into it and that was enough.

She sobs then, rocking that little bluejay nestled in her arms.

It was the only painting that came back inside.

Act 7

Kass props that painting up at her workstation, a reminder of what she's working towards. She *needs* to do this. She's done it before, that means it can be done again right? The magic isn't gone for good, isn't it?

Her eyes have been struggling to focus as she travels all over town looking for inspiration. Bunkers left behind during war embedded in the side of hills, great trees older than anyone can remember towering above, the hills in the distance razed for farmland, even the expression of activists fighting against the deforestation happening not so far from her hometown. Birds are her main subject though, even if all that's left are Ravens, she draws them in any shape and size. Most of them are dead, killed by something further up the food chain. Kass wonders what could be on the loose that so

many ravens have been taken out. They seem to follow her, every corner of her vision, she can see a raven perched up, watching.

She paints and she paints and she paints, even if it feels pointless, even if as she paints all she can think about are the old days, bright summers and springs in full bloom, nothing like the cold and decaying autumn, preparing for a completely bleak winter.

She snarls, she can't give up here, not now, not when she's so close to finding it. She can feel it deep in her soul, cold and withered as it may be there is still a pulse of life in her that she cannot bear to lose. God she's wanted this for so long maybe it's all she is now. Nothing else mattered, everything faded to a gentle static, sounding more and more like the tweeting of birds, a light breeze and the slow melodies of her father as he painted in his study-

Act 8

"Let's finish this, once and for all"

Kass makes her way up to the gallery full of trepidation, she's been asked to speak on behalf of her exhibit, and she's not exactly thrilled trying to sell people on paintings that look like they belong in an obituary. But she's not here for them, she's here for her latest painting she hangs, of a girl reaching out atop a radio tower, smack dab in the center of the showroom. Her pride and joy, a symbol of everything she's learnt and loved. The fog is extra thick today and she has to take extra care to watch her step. There are stars in her eyes, she can practically feel her father's approving smile upon her, she can almost hear laughter on the wind, the rustling of trees, she can, she's so close to being able to reach out and grab his hand.

—

Kass sits primly on the red bench seat, what a useless ornament she is, sitting patiently among the rabble, draped in greys. She frowns, no one was coming over to even talk to her, they avoided her like a plague, instead marvelling at the dark and haunting visages hung upon walls too good for her. This was supposed to be her night, but she sits among wreckage, invisible.

She sucks in a sigh-

The opportunity of a lifetime, her magnum opus, finally complete. She's starting to feel like she's owed *something* at least. Her singular glory day. She ignores the ravens staring beady-eyed at her, she pretends not to notice the black dog beneath her seat, waiting for a master that was never truly here. The venue drowns her out, and for the first time in years, she opens her eyes, greeted with the starry night sky, clear of all fog, her father stands with a soft and proud smile. "You did it Kass" He says simply. "Lets go home."

She reaches her hand out to a figure that no longer belonged to this world, and lets herself be taken away.

Epilogue

The rain hammers overhead, Kass can still hear the screeching of tires, can still feel her face smashing into the back of the seat in front of her. Her eyes don't focus, but her body tells her she's soaking wet and cold and numb and she can't feel her legs, her arms shake but her mind is startlingly clear. The sun looks so blinding, haloing her body made of lifeless steel lead, too heavy and still to move.

She sits strewn in the wreck as her mother sobs and wails to the backdrop of sirens.
blue, red, blue, red, blue, re-

Kass stares blankly at the unfinished dove.

It's as lifeless as this town. Even if death valley has been reclaimed by nature, maybe, by design, nothing was meant to flourish here. She's seen the populace age and wither, she's seen people come to die. She fears she'll be stuck here forever. She refuses with all of her heart to settle for so little.

When her paintings melt into unrecognisable stains, she rages. She no longer cares, not when there will always be eyes on her anyway as the 'girl who could never rise above her sordid beginnings'. Decorum never served her in any way except to make her a target of unjust jealousy and leave her isolated from her peers. They saw professionalism as pretension, would string her up as an egotist looking down her nose at them. She didn't need an attitude to do so if they simply did it to themselves. She's tired of being a target. But she made a promise long ago to stop antagonising those who would push her to violence. Even still... She thought it pointless to be demure in front of people who would go out of their way to get in her face. Respect certainly changes people.

Head held high, *-don't falter, don't falter now*. Wasted years her debt now paid in due diligence. She paints and paints and paints but she can't quite find it. The itch grows, the wind howls... The fog rolls in, and everything else around her disappears. She smokes in gallery backrooms, watching people fawn more and more over her morbid paintings, her cold photorealistic sketches brought to horrifying reality, the kind of filth her father was always saddened by, he would talk long into the night about interpreting artwork, and how he deeply valued capturing joy in a world largely devoid of it. He would smile softly, voice full of pride for her work, and call her the biggest joy he'd ever received.

But she's no beautiful bluejay, she's a shrike, butchering all she holds dear. And to her despair, everyone laps it up. And maybe, just maybe that's all that matters. Her mother talks to her about grief and she can't decide if she wants to hug the cold woman or spit in her face and laugh. It's much better than their rocky silences, stepping on eggshells and echoing silence born of hatred for how everything turned out for the two of them. At least they're unhappy together.

She makes it, in her own way...

Re: Imagine

MEDICAL REPORT

Patient 431 - Kassandra Taekachi

Note: due to the nature of the patient's condition and the conflict of interest brought about by Dr Taekachi being a direct relative of the patient, we have asked Dr Taekachi to remove herself from taking personal oversight of the patient. This has been resisted and ultimately the request has been dropped.

This is a rare case, but one that has been steadily trending upwards if scientific reports are to be believed, that of Genesis's suddenly awakening under extreme duress. There have been several instances of Genesis's evolving in life threatening situations, but there is a case to be made here that Kassamdra Taekachi has hers awaken and evolve due to no longer being able to repress intense emotional stress.

This Genesis, which we are dubbing "Imagine" in Miss Taekachi's stead, is an adaption of her old Genesis "Visualise" Which allowed Miss Taekachi to perfectly visualise anything she has seen down to incredibly precise details, Almost a form of photographic memory. "Imagine" seems to draw from memory just like "Visualise" but instead of simply being able to perceive, the brain instead seems to believe it is living fully within a memory and thus has shut Miss Taekachi's body down into a comatose state.

We have run tests on her body, and other than needing to maintain the body's health as with any patient in a comatose state, she appears perfectly healthy. Further scans on her brain activity need to be conducted along with simply monitoring her condition. It is currently unclear if Miss Taekachi can be awoken from her slumber, but Dr Taekachi is adamant on trying.

Signed

Dr Greyson, Medical director of Masokai Municipal Hospital.