

Speaking of Aspasia

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Chapter 1

You sit up suddenly, hunching over your legs. Your hands ache and you realize that they are clenched around a blanket. You let go of the blanket and blink a few times trying to get your eyes to adjust from the sleepiness. Staring at your hands, you wiggle your fingers until they come into focus; then you look around. *Where am I?* You glance down and inspect the brown pull out couch you are sitting on. You are on top of a crisp white sheet and a made-for-motels type of blanket is covering your legs. There is a single white pillow where your head was resting moments before. The remaining couch pillows are on the floor. You whip your head around the room. *Am I supposed to be here? But how did I get here? Why would I be here?* You stare dumbfoundedly at everything in the room. Startled by your calmness, you jump up and locate the door. But, the second you stand, your legs become wobbly, you are attacked by a head rush, and your breathing becomes rapid. Your lungs squeeze as you try to inhale. You reach behind you, grabbing the back of the couch and stabilizing yourself.

Inhale. INHALE! Now exhale. Slowly your breathing returns back to normal. You wiggle your toes and feel the weight of your legs. Looking down, you notice that the gray sweatpants and crewneck are not yours. You pull on the neckline of the crewneck and check your shirt. *Not mine either.* You shake your head to stop being distracted by the clothes and shift your focus to the door. Steadying yourself, you quietly make your way over. You reach out to grab the door knob but pause mid air. *Where am I? Where would I go?*

You grab the doorknob. *As long as it is out of here.* You twist but there is no budge. You try pulling. Nothing. You start jiggling the door handle; then you try yanking. You run a hand through your hair forcing yourself to breathe.

I am locked in here. I am LOCKED in here! Breathe. Breathe. Breathe.

You turn around and steady yourself by leaning against the door. Seconds later, you are on the hardwood floor. You try to slow your breathing through a technique you had once learned. It was your sister, no... mother, no... teacher... maybe? *Who taught me to breathe like this?* You push your head between your knees.

An eternity later, your breaths slow and you wipe your sweaty palms on the sweater. With one last inhale you stand up and face the door. Straightening out and holding your head high, you grab the door handle. *It is still locked.* Your hand drops to your side and your shoulders slump. You try to shake off the feeling of the locked door on your palms and decide to confront the rest of the room. *Might as well see what I have to work with.*

The wall directly across the door has a large window. Dark brown mahogany wood covers the first three feet of the wall. The rest of the wall is made from a large glass window. However, the window does not face the outside, but instead you are looking at rigging with lights. Curiosity piqued, you make your way across the room.

You push your hands against the window sill and lean your forehead on the glass. An audience hall sprawls out beneath you. The rigged lighting that you had noticed before is directed at a stage dressed with a giant red curtain. Rows and rows of seats face the stage. The dimly lit room with all the empty seats makes the hairs on your arm stand up. You hug yourself and turn around to take in the rest of the room that you are locked in.

The left and right walls are booklined. The couch you woke up on is pushed up against the bookshelves on the right. To match the mahogany wooden paneling and bookshelves, there is a mahogany table and chairs in the center of the room. A lazy-boy type of chair is to your left. You make your way to one of the bookshelves and pick up a book at random. It is in a language you don't recognize. You put that book back and grab another. Again, this book is unreadable to you. *This isn't in the same language as the first book.* You start scanning the spines along the shelf and realize the titles are in different languages. You only recognize some.

You walk to the table and pull out a chair. *What am I doing here?* You prop your elbows onto the table and rest your chin in your hands. *I have been kidnapped.* The realization dawns on you. *I HAVE BEEN KIDNAPPED!* Squeezing your eyes shut, you don't allow this thought to make you spiral. *Okay so why would they kidnap me? Ransom? No. Nobody I know has enough money to pay a ransom. To be trafficked? Maybe? But why keep me in such a nice room?* You sigh and place your head on the table. *Think! Think! Think. How do I get out of here?*

Your head is on the table when a loud noise startles you. You jump up and push your back against the glass wall and look towards the noise. Bursting through the LOCKED door is a tall, young, brown-haired woman. She sweeps into the room with long strides and chin held high. You bolt past her racing to the door. It shuts with a slam right as you get to it.

"God dammit," you say, smacking your fist against the relocked door. "You opened the door!" you blurt out, spinning around to face the woman. *She could be dangerous.* You grab a book from the bookshelf next to you, and hold it up in a defensive position ready to smack her if need be.

"What are you doing? Why are you holding the book like that?" she asks, looking amused.

"Protecting myself," you say matter of factly. "I don't know who you are. Take me out of this room!" you demand the book still up in the air.

"How?" she asks bemused. "Can't let you out of the room, the door is locked." She looks towards the book in your hand. "And I am not going to attack you." She looks entertained by the thought and gracefully makes her way to the table.

"Stop moving!" you say, distressed by her composure. "Who are you? And how can I trust you won't attack me?" you ask, not wanting her to invade your space. *My space? No. I can't get comfy here.* She stops walking and stares at you.

“You are just going to have to trust me.” She seems perplexed as if there was something on the tip of her tongue but she can’t figure it out. She shakes her head and a smirk dances across her face. “Why would I hurt you? If anything, I am confused as to what you are doing here. How do I know you won’t hurt me?” With this she takes a seat at the table.

“Just open the door for me. Please,” you beg, putting the book down to show her you are asking in good faith. *I just want to leave.*

“Like I said, it is locked. It won’t open,” she says with a sigh. But she gets up and heads towards you. You raise the book up again taking a step back. She doesn’t try to hide a laugh as she steps past you and continues to the door. She places her hand on the doorknob and twists.

“See?” she says smugly. “It doesn’t open.” She glides back to the table and takes a seat. You drop the book as she studies you. You try opening the door one more time and turn back to face the woman.

She has dark hair pulled back into a half up half down hairstyle. She pushes some of the hair that is framing her face behind her ears. Her piercing brown eyes stare you down as you observe her. If it wasn’t for the smile dancing across her lips you would think she was mad at you with the way her eyebrows arch. Most captivating is her nose. There is a bump in the middle making all her sharp features fit together like pieces in a puzzle. When you are finally able to force your eyes off her face, you notice the cream colored gown and sandalwood colored sandals that she is wearing. Your eyes migrate back to her face and when you make eye contact with her you realize that she is investigating you as well.

“Want to stop staring at me?” you ask, sounding hypocritical, but her extended gaze has now made the hairs on your arms stand up again.

“What are you doing here?” she asks, perplexed yet amused.

“I wish I knew,” you say defeated. “What are you doing here?”

“Well I am here because I am always called to these events. But no one else has ever been here with me before until now.” She slowly trails off as if in mid thought. “So now I am trying to figure out what you are doing here,” she says with an extended exhale.

“If I could tell you I would,” you respond, realizing how true that statement really is. “What do you mean you were called here?” you ask now that you fully processed what she said.

“Every few centuries people decide to talk about me. When this happens, the universe brings me to witness the conversation.” She looks at you amused by your reaction. “So either we are here to watch a conversation about you and I am here for some reason, or we are here to watch

a conversation about me and you are here for some reason.” She says all of this so matter of factly that your head starts to spin. *A conversation about me?*

“Well considering that you have been to these before, I am going to go out on a limb and assume that it is for you,” you say once you stop your brain from reeling. *What would people say about me anyway?* You stumble your way to the couch and sit where you first woke up. Your head snaps up to face the woman. “Did you say every few centuries you are at one of these?” She responds with a smile. “Who the hell are you?”

“They,” she says leaning back in her chair and talking as if she is about to admit to you that you are in the presence of royalty, “call me Aspasia.” There is silence in the room. *Am I supposed to know who she is?*

“When did you live?” you ask, opting for a more polite question. “You know, considering you are throwing around the word centuries so casually. And what do you mean *they* call you Aspasia?”

“Man, I lived a long time ago. The fifth century to be exact,” she says reminiscing. Your jaw drops. She takes a moment before continuing. “Let me ask you this; what is your name?”

“I am” you start but no words come out. “My name is...” still nothing. *Why can't I remember my name?* You pass your hands through your hair and try to rack your brain to figure out your name. You start breathing rapidly.

“Don’t stress about it. You won’t remember,” the woman, Aspasia, says. “Forgetting names and other trivial things is a side effect of coming to these things. Or at least it used to be for me. And apparently it is for you too.” She watches you shift uncomfortably on the couch.

“How can I not know my name?” you ask, rubbing your hand down your face. Aspasia’s words sink in but mean nothing to you. “How can I not know who I am?”

“You know who you are, nothing is different about you. You just don’t know your name, but you are still who you are,” Aspasia reiterates in a way that you think is her being comforting. Your head spins. *What is happening? What is HAPPENING?*

“Listen to me,” Aspasia says, her voice laced with authority. The sympathy is gone. You look at her. She holds eye contact with you. Her brown eyes pierce your soul. “You need to snap out of the reality you are used to and accept this new reality. *You* have been brought to witness this conversation, and I wish I could tell you why but I can’t. I can promise, however, that we can try and figure it out along the way.” Sympathy starts to creep back into her voice. “I will tell you that this place is safe. And while I don’t know how we got here, I know they won’t let us leave until this conversation is over.” She takes a deep breath and smiles at you fully sympathetic now. “I know it is going to be hard, but you are going to have to get used to this new reality. The more you resist, the less fun this conversation will be.”

She is staring at you so intently that you drop your gaze and stare at your feet. *This can not be happening.* You close your eyes and take many deep breaths. *Can I do anything else besides listen to her?*

“Look on the brightside,” Aspasia says after a few moments. “Now I have someone to share this experience with. I can tell you whether the things these people say are true!” As she speaks excitement creeps into her voice in a way you haven’t heard yet. You draw your eyes back to Aspasia. She is giddy as she stands up and looks at you. “We can make a game out of this. We can make this fun!” Aspasia looks so happy and is pacing like an excited toddler that you can’t help but smile a little.

“You look more calm,” she says, turning toward you, calming herself down as well. “Have you come to accept your reality yet?”

“No,” you respond. “But also, I feel as though I have to, for now.” You rub your eyes, your smile fading ever so slightly.

“Well that’s better than nothing,” she says as she retakes her seat. Her cheeks remain flushed with the excitement she experienced moments before.

“So when you say conversation,” you say, getting Aspasia’s attention. “What do you mean by that?” Aspasia looks at you practically glowing. She sits up, crosses her legs, leans forward and smiles.

“Okay so,” she says, gesturing with her hands. “For context, this is the third talk that I have been brought to. The last two times I was called, a group of people sat in a circle and discussed me. They discussed where I was born and what my relationship to Pericles was like and whether I philosophized with the biggest philosophers of my time.” She pauses for a moment as if reminiscing. “So I am assuming that this conversation is going to be the same as those two.”

“Wait, when you say Pericles, do you mean that Greek politician person?” you ask unsure if you are thinking of the right person.

“That is the Pericles I am referring to,” she answers trailing off. “That was so long ago, but it feels like yesterday,” she says, still lost in thought.

“Wait, so you were hanging around people like Pericles?” you ask skeptically. This brings Aspasia back to the present. “No offense but I have never heard about you before. Who are you again?” Aspasia looks at you as if offended, but then she smiles.

“Well, I guess it is a good thing that you are here.” Her smile turns into a smirk.

“Oh I see how it is,” you say trying to match her tone but you still feel light headed. You rest your head in your hand.

"I have something that will make watching this conversation more digestible," she says sympathetically. She looks around the room like she's trying to be sneaky, despite it being just the two of you. She clears her throat, sits up straight, and says "popcorn." In an instant a bag of microwavable popcorn appears on the table.

"What the hell!" you startle back in surprise. "What kind of witchcraft is that? How did you do that?" you say and somehow you are at the door shaking the doorknob as hard as you can.

"I told you: this will be much more enjoyable if you accept this new reality," Aspasia says laughing. "I probably should have warned you though." You make your way back to the couch one shaky step after the other and sit back down again. "But seriously, you will be able to have whatever you want in here if you're willing to accept that this is how it is." She waves her arms around. "This is how it works."

"Can you get me an ax so I can chop that door down," you try and ask jokingly but there is some desperation in your voice.

"Unfortunately you can't ask for anything to help you escape. Why do you think I was unable to open that door?" You stare at her trying to process what she is saying.

"Try it. Ask for something simple," she says, indicating to you. You look up at her and take a deep breath.

"Okay," you say. "Coke." You startle back as a bottle of coke appears on the table. You make your way over to it.

"Ooh, perfect timing, the show is about to commence," she says, glancing out the glass wall. She looks at you with a grin and moves her chair so her knees are banging the mahogany paneling. You place your chair a few feet from her and press your forehead against the glass.

"A show?" you ask confused. "I thought you said a conversation?"

Aspasia turns to you and gives you a smirk. "What's the difference?"

Chapter 2

“Well, of course it's our fault for not accounting for a freak storm!” says a woman, her voice laced with irritation and disappointment. She walks down the aisle, the heels of her shoes echoing around the room.

With one quick glance to Apsasia, you jump up and start banging the glass. “HELLO!” you scream. “I am trapped up here! I have been taken against my will! Hello! Get the authorities!” You start waving trying to get the woman's attention.

“Well I just talked to the front desk and only a handful of other people have checked in for the conference.” The woman sighs and crosses an arm over her chest.

“HELLO! Just look up!” you shout, still banging on the glass.

“She can't hear you,” Apsasia says with disappointment, but she is looking at you with sympathy. “Get it in your head: you are stuck here until the discussion is over. That is how it has always worked and that's probably how it is going to continue to work.” You drag your hands down the glass and flop into the chair defeated. *I really am just stuck here.* You look over to Apsasia and then down to the woman below.

The woman is quiet as she listens to the person on the other end of the line. Waiting for her turn to speak, she fidgets with a gold ring on her left hand. Her fingers brush over the big diamond in the center of two blue stones. She has dark gray curly hair to her shoulders and gold hoops in her ears. She is dressed with small heeled boots, well-fitted cream khakis, and a tight black top. Despite being unzipped, you realize that the North Face jacket she wears was made to fit her perfectly.

“Well, we are snowed in. As in, everything is shut down. No one can come or go.” The woman lets out an extended breath, walks to the stage, and places her black Coach bag down pulling out her laptop. She balances her phone between her shoulder and her ear as she rapidly types.

“Yea, I know. All the other board members were supposed to come today.” She closes her laptop and pinches the bridge of her nose. She grabs hold of her phone. “Well now it is up to me to find a way to combine the handful of us who made it into one panel or roundtable or something of that sort. I wasn't prepared to merge us as one.” She falls silent, once again listening to the person on the other end of the line.

“A freak storm, huh?” you say reclining in your chair. “It's not like I would be able to know that considering that I was kidnapped and trapped in this room with no sense of what is happening in the outside world.” You try not to roll your eyes.

“And to think that you had adjusted to this reality,” Apsasia counters snarkily. “It's my fault really for making such a bold assumption.”

“I know. I KNOW! I was supposed to use this conference to advocate as to why I deserved to be department chair.” You and Aspasia jump at the sound of the women's aggression. “No, I know that doesn't mean I can't get the job, but it sure as hell is going to make it much more complicated.” You and Aspasia give one another a glance before refocusing on the woman. “There were supposed to be about fifty more people coming and just like that only a fifth of the confirmed attendees show up.” The woman sighs and closes her eyes. “I just need to figure out—hold on David, Diedra just walked in,” she says, her voice dropping many octaves to barely a whisper. “Yes I'll call you later. Bye-bye.”

“Diedra!” the woman exclaims with all notions of defeat and frustration gone from her voice.

“Adeline, how are you?” says the older lady, Deidra, with a southern twang in her voice. “The snow is coming down like cats and dogs out there. A freak storm! What are the odds?” Adeline gives a chuckle. Diedra looks like she tried to tame her frizzy white hair with a low ponytail, but some strands escaped the efforts and opted to poke out in all sorts of directions. She is wearing little black boots, leggings, a long maroon shirt-dress, a green and blue flannel. Her feet point outward as she walks down the aisle making her waddle. When she reaches Adeline she gives her a big hug.

“Adeline,” Deidra says, grabbing the sides of Adeline's arms and leaning back to look at the woman. “How lovely it is to see you!”

“It is great to see you as well,” Adeline says, taking a step backwards out of the embrace but keeping a smile on her face.

“But Adeline! What are you going to do about the conference?” Dierdra says, concern seeping in her voice.

“You know,” Adeline says, shrugging her shoulders. “We are just going to have to adapt. I am thinking of doing a roundtable type of thing with all of us who made it in before the storm.” Adeline gives a small chuckle and starts fidgeting with her ring. “I should have kept in mind the age old expression ‘expect the unexpected.’ But I guess I am just going to have to make it work.” Her mouth pinches and her nose scrunches up as if she smelled something sour. She rubs her hand on her nose, and when her hand is gone you think you may have imagined the face that she was making. It was as though she was smiling the whole time.

“I mean, this storm is crazy,” Diedra reiterates with disbelief. “You know I have hosted many conferences, so consider me your right hand woman. I can help you with whatever you need.” She smiles at Adeline and observes the room. “This is pretty homey. I think we should figure out how to hold the roundtable here.” Diedra looks at Adeline with authority. “I think a roundtable works best given all the circumstances. I was poking around the mezzanine floors for a better space to hold the conference, but the rooms weren't as nice over there.”

"I appreciate you looking out for me," Adeline says but the smile on her face now seems forced.

"I am thinking we don't have people sitting in the stands. That seems awkward; hundreds of empty seats for only a handful of them to be used." Diedra continues speaking, ignoring Adeline's tone.

"I was already thinking that," Adeline says, taking control of the conversation once again. "I am going to look around and find some chairs and tables that we can put on the stage. Then we can make an intimate circle out of them so it is easier to have the discussion." Adeline gently rests a hand on Diedra's shoulder. "I know you have more experience with conferences than me, however, I have this under control. So no need to take on the extra stress." Adeline starts walking up the aisle she had walked down earlier then faces Diedra who seemed a little taken aback. "If you want to help, you can come with me while I find some chairs."

"I don't know how much help I will be bringing the chairs in here due to my back," Diedra says chuckling, any uncertainty evaporating from her expression. "But I can definitely help you find them." With that, the two women walk out of the room.

"Wow, this discussion about you is proving to be quite riveting," you say facing Aspasia with a smirk.

"Oh, very funny," she responds. "While I would like to tell you to shut up so I can listen to how they talk about me, I feel as though this discussion is going to be very different from what I am expecting."

"And what is it that you are expecting?" you challenge.

"I mean we have seen two people and I am already feeling the tension. I am telling you, in the past everyone was all buddy-buddy," Aspasia responded. "I feel like this," Aspasia gestures wildly, "tension is something that is going to transfer to the discussion."

"An interesting take," you respond, as though in deep thought. You are about to interrogate Aspasia about these previous conferences she keeps mentioning when Diedra and Adeline make their way back into the audience hall. The two of you push your foreheads against the glass once again.

Adeline efficiently makes her way down the aisle despite holding an awkwardly shaped chair made of wood and leather. Diedra is behind her holding a smaller wooden chair upholstered in white. When Adeline gets to the stairs that lead onto the stage she pauses for a moment before placing the chair down.

"I don't think I can make it up the stairs on my own. If you could help me carry mine up I would appreciate it," Adeline says, turning to Diedra. The women struggle their way up the stairs, readjusting the awkward chair as they go. When they get to the top of the stairs, the audience

hall echoes with the sound of the women's loud breathing. A minute later Adeline brings Diedra's chair on the stage while Diedra continues to rest.

"I was thinking about it and I think that I am going to set up a projector so that we can use my presentation slides as a loose outline for the convention. I feel as though I touch on all the main topics that people will discuss about Aspasia," Adeline says, turning to Diedra.

"Are you sure that is the best idea?" challenges Diedra. "I mean, everyone is focusing on different elements of Aspasia. What if you don't have slides for some people?"

"Well, if that is the case, I will allow people to bring up a topic if we don't touch on it." Adeline stands up taller and looks Diedra in the eye. "If for some reason *my* presentation idea does not work, then we can change it to something else," Adeline says with a forced smile on her face.

"Okay, we can try it your way," Diedra says, skepticism seeping into her southern drawl.

"Alright," Adeline says, clapping her hands after a brief moment. "Why don't you keep grabbing the chairs that you can carry and I'm going to go upstairs and grab the projector." The women exit the room in silence.

"Okay, so these past conferences. What were they like?" you ask Aspasia giving her your undivided attention. Aspasia rotates her chair to face you, crosses her legs, and takes a deep breath before answering.

"So the first conference I ever attended was bizarre. Think about how confused you are being here, it was one hundred times more confusing for me. I mean, I died, how was I here?" She stares off into space reminiscing. "Of course, the conversation didn't take place here. I soon discovered that it was 50BCE in the way that you all count dates." Your jaw drops to the floor.

"What? I told you that I am popular. Want to hear something more crazy?" Aspasia pauses for a moment enjoying seeing you sitting at the edge of your seat. "The discussion took place at the library of Alexandria."

"You got to witness a conversation about *you* at the library of Alexandria?" You stare at Aspasia in disbelief.

"Yup. It was an interesting conversation too. The whole thing took half a day and it was composed of five men. The minute they started discussing someone else, I was whisked away, back to the next realm." As you process what Aspasia is saying, Adeline enters the room and starts setting up the projector. Distracted for a moment you give Aspasia your full attention once again.

"The second conversation that I was brought to took place in 1750 CE. That one happened in Paris. There was one woman at that gathering; that girl will forever have my heart. That

discussion had a total of eight people and, much to my surprise, the talk lasted a whole day.” Aspasia throws some popcorn in her mouth before continuing.

“This discussion seems like it’s going to be different for a handful of reasons. Firstly, if I recall, Adeline said something about fifty people intending to be at this conversation.” You nod in agreement. “What could all those people possibly be saying about me? Don’t get me wrong, I am proud of my accomplishments, but I feel like there is only so much one can say about what I did.”

“And what were those things that you did?” you inquire.

“Well, I guess that is what we will find out today. No need for me to spoil it now.” Aspasia responds with a smirk. “Also this conversation feels like it’s going to be different because everyone is trapped in this hotel. When Giovanni Ricci got mad at Genevieve Auclair back in Paris, he stormed out and didn’t come back until the very end of the discussion. People here have nowhere to storm off to, and I think that is going to prove to be an issue.”

As soon as Aspasia finishes speaking, a man in his early twenties walks into the audience hall, his trench coat flowing behind him with every step. He is wearing a dark brown sweater over a white dress shirt. In his right hand he carries three books. Over his left shoulder is an expensive looking briefcase. His light brown hair is parted down the middle and in a swept back position. His dress shoes clank on the vinyl flooring alerting Adeline of his presence as he reaches her.

“Hello, welcome to the Aspasia convention. I am Adeline Jackson,” says Adeline, extending a hand to the man.

“William Walton,” he responds curtly as he takes her hand. “Are you in charge of this conference?” he asks, placing his hand back in his pocket and looking around the room as though looking for someone else to speak too.

“I am,” responds Adeline. “Is—”

“What is the status of the convention given the storm?” interrupts William. Adeline closes her mouth and interlaces her fingers aggressively. “I flew all the way out here and did all this research. It is imperative for me to present. I didn’t come here for nothing.” He purses his lips waiting for Adeline to answer.

“Of course, I think we are all feeling in the same boat,” Adeline says, crossing her arms and staring at William. She takes a sharp breath. “So, we are thinking that because only a handful of us made it before the storm hit, we are going to do a roundtable and have everyone share their research about Aspasia in that way.”

“Really? That’s going to be a hell of a disaster,” William retorts, pinching the bridge of his nose and rolling his eyes.

“Excuse me?” Adeline says, jolting her head in surprise.

“Be serious for a moment,” William says, continuing to talk down to Adeline. “We all have different focuses when it comes to Aspasia. It is impractical to do it this way,” he says unapologetically.

“Well, considering I am the one running this conference and you are not, we are going to try it this way,” Adeline says, standing up tall and glaring at William. “And now that you are here, maybe you can make yourself useful. You will find an older lady, Diedra, getting chairs from the back room. You can go help her and make sure she doesn’t hurt her back,” Adeline says to William. She turns her back on the man and keeps working on the projector. “Go along now.”

“I need to work on research for my dissertation,” he says, scoping the room. He starts making his way to one of the chairs in the stands.

“No, I think you are going to respect the people in charge here and are going to help Diedra with the chairs,” Adeline says, turning back to face William. “After all, you seem like someone who came here for a purpose. What is it that you gain from this talk? You mentioned something about a dissertation. Maybe coming here is required for that. Who is your mentor for your said dissertation again?” Adeline inquires.

William clears his throat. “Professor Severin Geary at Northridge University.”

“Ahhh, while I don’t know everyone in our field, I just happen to be friends with Professor Geary. It would be a shame if they got a letter about how uncooperative you are being at this conference,” Aspasia says while she plays with her ring. William faces Adeline and the two battle in a long silent staring contest.

“What are they doing?” you whisper to Aspasia, refusing to peel your eyes from the stare off down below.

“I don’t know,” she whispers back.

“Where did you say the room is?” William asks a minute later. His jaw is clenched; his voice is restrained. Adeline smiles with a glint of satisfaction in her eye.

“Out through that door,” she says nodding towards the entrance he just walked through. “Walk down the hallway to the end, take a left, and there should be a sign that says storage. It should be a large room with all the old and replaced hotel furniture.” William shuts his eyes and takes a deep breath before placing his briefcase and books on the stage. He removes his trenchcoat and places it on top of his bag. He turns towards Adeline as if to say something else, but instead chooses to exit the room.

Adeline continues working on the projector. With a whirring sound, the projector comes to life and displays a blue square on the red curtain. Adeline, with her hands on her hips, stares at her hard work. A smile spreads onto her face and she nods as if satisfied. She then makes her way onto the stage and behind the curtain.

The room is once again empty of people; the only distraction is the noise that Adeline is making behind the curtain. You turn to Aspasia and study her. She has leaned back away from the glass and has her head rested on the back of the chair. Her eyes are closed. She seems peaceful. "What do you think William's opinions of you are going to be?" you ask. "Ya know, given all that research."

Aspasia lets out an exaggerated exhale and looks at you. "He is pretentious, I will give you that." She stops speaking for a moment looking thoughtful. "But sometimes, and only sometimes, do those people tend to have good points. So...", she says with reflection. "He will either do me justice or be the absolute worst but nowhere in between I think." You sit, reflecting on what Aspasia said.

"Oh look, Adeline is back," Aspasia says with a finger on the glass. Adeline wheels out a giant whiteboard and places it in front of the red curtain. She is aligning it with the blue projection when Diedra and William enter the auditorium. William is easily holding a big cushioned yellow chair. The back and the arms of the chair have vertical lines making it seem like sun rays are escaping the seat of the chair. Despite the odd chair, your attention is snatched by the blackboard that Diedra is pushing down the aisle. It is one of those blackboards that you have not seen in years. *Those still exist?*

"What do you have there?" Adeline asks, looking up from adjusting the whiteboard.

"Oh, I was just thinking we could have the blackboard just in case the presentation idea doesn't work," Diedra responds with a laugh. "You know me and technology. We don't really work hand in hand."

"That is a good point," Adeline says with a forced smile. "So I guess it is a good thing that you are not going to be in charge of running the presentation, isn't it?"

"You are right," says Diedra as the smile leaves her face. "This is your conference to run, *but* there is no harm in having backup options." William places the yellow chair on the stage and leans down to stretch.

"Will you carry the blackboard up here?" Diedra asks William. William glances at Adeline. "Give me one second," he says with a sigh.

With the blackboard on the stage and the projector set up, the three leave the room. You look at Aspasia. She has chosen a book from one of the shelves and has started reading it. *What could she have done to have so many conferences about her? And fifty people? Who are you?*

You sit there questioning who the woman next to you is. As you stare, a strand of her hair falls into her face. She gracefully pushes it behind her ear and then rests her head on her hand.

You jump as noise fills the hall below. William enters the room struggling under the weight of a large light brown leather chair that is permanently reclined. Adeline comes in next holding a wood-frame, low to the ground chair with slightly darker than sage green cushions. Diedra arrives holding something that looks like a foldable beach chair, but instead has a wood frame that doesn't fold and a nice-looking single piece of leather as the seating, rather than cheap beach chair material. *Wow this hotel can not stick to an aesthetic.* Two other people not holding chairs bring up the rear of the parade.

Adeline and William carry the chairs up the stairs while the others watch. After bringing up Diedra's chair, they take a moment to catch their breaths.

"Sorry that you caught us in the middle of our rearrangements," Adeline says, walking down the stairs to greet the two new people. "Adeline Jackson. I am the chair of this convention."

"Hello. My name is Sarah McKinney and this is Micheal Ventura," the woman says as she gestures to the man next to her. "We were just wondering whether the convention is still on, since so many people are unable to be here." Sarah is wearing a navy dress, navy boots, and black tights with flower cutouts in them. She has a black jacket resting on one arm and a giant black briefcase hanging over her other shoulder. You are captivated by her red bobbed haircut. When she shakes Adeline's hand her hair bounces ever so slightly. The man next to Sarah could not be more different than her. He has straight dark brown greasy hair. He wears thick rimmed black glasses. His North Face puffer vest rests over a stained olive green sweater. His backpack is more suitable for long hikes than nice conventions. Adeline wipes her hand on her pants after shaking his hand.

"Yes, the conference is still going to happen, just differently than we have planned. We are thinking of having a round table with everyone who has made it," Adeline responds.

"That is an interesting choice," Michael says with a nasally voice. Sarah whips her head to give him a hard stare.

"*But* we are looking forward to it," she adds with emphasis. Sarah looks around the room and towards the chairs on the stage. "Is there anything that we can help with?"

"Yes, actually. We are bringing chairs to the stage for the round table. Would you mind helping us grab the rest? We need twelve total," Adeline responds with a smile.

"Of course just tell us where to go," Sarah says, returning the smile. Michael nods complacently.

“Adeline darling, I don’t think I can lift any of the remaining chairs,” Deirdra says as the others exit. “I don’t think my back can handle it.”

“Of course. Make sure to take care of yourself.” Adeline says hiding her eye roll from Diedra. “Do you think you can start making the chairs into a circle around the whiteboard instead?”

“I will give it a go,” Diedra responds. Once the others leave Diedra tries to move the yellow sun ray chair, but it doesn’t budge. Instead, she moves the blackboard next to the whiteboard and smiles.

“Do you think this is the right place?” Your eyes snap towards the voice. Two young girls are walking down the aisle. The girl on the left shrugs coolly, keeping her eyes focused straight ahead. The girl who asked the question is wearing jeans and a white button-down shirt. There is a crewneck resting over her arm. She has a tote bag designed with a map of a city over her shoulder. The other girl wears pointed heels, nicely fitted trousers, and a black button-down shirt. Her hair is pulled back into a ponytail. She is wearing gold wire-framed glasses and she has a reddish-brown leather briefcase with black bows on it. A black trench coat rests over her arm.

“Valentina!” exclaims Diedra. “I am so glad you were able to make it in before the storm!” The girl in business casual attire straightens up and gives Deidra a small smile. Diedra wraps Valentina in a hug.

“Hello! I am Diedra,” says Diedra, extending a hand out to the other girl.

“Mary Crafton,” says the other girl, shaking Diedra’s hand. “Is this-”

“Do you know what is happening now that we are snowed in?” Valentina interrupts.

“Well the conference is still going on, but due to the circumstances, differently than originally intended. Adeline wants to do a roundtable of sorts so we can all present our research,” answers Diedra with skepticism in her voice, “But we will see if that actually happens.” Valentina looks around the room disapprovingly.

“Well, um, I am glad you have it all under control,” offers Mary in the silence.

“Excuse us. Pardon us,” Adelines voice echoes around the auditorium. The girls step aside as Adeline passes them holding a wood-framed chair with brown leather upholstery. William follows holding a wooden framed heart shaped chair with red upholstery.

“I could have sworn I saw a chair just like that at the last conference,” Aspasia says without taking her eyes off the scene down below. *Damn. That chair must be like a hundred years old.* Bringing up the rear is Sarah and Michael lugging a giant gray cushioned chair together.

“My name is Adeline Jackson,” Adeline says as she extends her hand out to Valentina and then Mary. “I am the Chair of this Aspasia conference. Unfortunately the rest of my team couldn't make it, but this conference should be good nonetheless.”

“Oh, I thought she was in charge,” Mary says, indicating towards Diedra.

“Diedra? No. She is just helping me set everything up due to all the changes,” Adeline says with a forced smile at Mary and then Diedra.

“Oh, sorry that was my mistake,” says Mary apologetically. “I am Mary Crafton. Thank you for trying to make this all work despite all the mishaps.” Valentina gives Mary a slight side eye. Mary shakes her head taken aback.

“Adeline, I want you to meet my student, Valentina,” says Diedra, putting a hand behind Valentina's back and nudging her towards Adeline.

“Valentina Darnell,” Valentina says with extreme professionalism. Her jaw is locked as she continues to speak. “I am really looking forward to this convention and presenting my research. I hope this all goes well.”

“I need—I mean want this convention to go just as smoothly as you do,” Adeline responds, replastering her smile to her face.

Valentina glances around the room. “Do you know if this conference is going to get the same amount of academic coverage as it would have without the storm?”

“If everything goes well, I don't see why not. But either way, it will be a very informative conference,” Adeline replies with annoyance creeping into her voice.

“Is there anything we can help you do to set up?” asks Mary after the slight awkward silence.

“Yes actually, would the two of you help us get the last round of chairs?” Adeline says, turning back towards Mary with an appreciative smile.

“Of course,” Mary responds. Everyone but Diedra leaves the room but not without an exaggerated sigh from William. When the group returns, William is carrying a green, nursery looking chair with a tall backrest. Michael and Sarah are carrying a baroque inspired chair with big cushions covered in blue and white designs together. Next come Adeline and Valentina carrying a sage green chair that is shaped like a U with a giant cushion shoved midway through. Bringing up the rear is Mary carrying a final green chair. It is also U-shaped but smaller than the other chair. Its edges are more soft with an emphasis on comfort proven by the back cushion.

“Well done team!” says Adeline out of breath. “This looks good. Feel free to choose any chairs you want. I am going to take the one by the whiteboard but the rest are up for grabs.” Adeline

takes off her North Face jacket and places it on the green chair that Mary had just set down. "I am going to find us some tables that we can put our stuff on." With that Adeline leaves the room.

Everyone besides Diedra is still heaving as they choose their chairs. Diedra chooses the green sturdy back chair next to her blackboard. William places his jacket on the brown leather slightly reclined chair. He places two of his books in the pocket off the armrest. He takes a seat, crosses his legs, and starts reading one of the books. Valentina takes the chair to the right of him, the very simple white upholstered chair. She crosses her legs and rests her hands on her knees as if unsure about what to do. Mary takes one of the low wooden green chairs. It is one away from William on the other side of Valentina. She immediately sits cross legged on the chair and starts typing on her phone. Michael takes the fancy leather beach chair, two chairs down from Adeline and Sarah takes the green hard U-shaped chair next to him. They both pull out their laptops and start typing.

"How did they do that?" Aspasia asks, turning towards you. "They chose every chair that I assumed they would."

"Too bad you didn't bet on it," you respond. "You could have made a lot of money."

"There are still five empty chairs," Aspasia said, slightly mischievous. "We should guess where the new people are going to sit before they sit down."

"I'm in," you respond. "What are we betting?"

"Bragging rights?" Aspasia asks.

"Oh come on, we need to do something with higher stakes," you say rolling your eyes.

"Bragging rights for now and then in the next game we can do higher stakes," Aspasia says smiling. "We need to work our way up."

"Okay fine," you say, just as Valentina decides to break the silence down below.

"You seem like you have done these conferences before," Valentina says, turning to face William.

William gives Valentina the briefest look, "Yup," he utters and turns back to his book.

"What are you reading?" Valentina continues, attempting to break the silence once again.

"It is research for my PhD," he says without looking up. Valentina nods as if unsure what to do next. She takes a moment to observe the room and then pulls out her laptop. You turn to speak to Aspasia, when Adeline stumbles her way into the room with two foldable tables under her arms.

"I think we will probably need two more tables," Adeline says out of breath as she places the tables down on the stage. "William, would you mind grabbing them?" William looks up from his book and gives Adeline a hard stare. She raises an eyebrow.

"Yes, I will get them," William says with a sigh. "Where are they?" he asks, frustration seeping out with every word.

"Behind the big couch in the storage room." Adeline crosses her arms and gives William a smile. "I really appreciate all your help." William glares at her before exiting the room.

Adeline finishes setting up the foldable tables, when two new people make their way into the room. The one on the left wears khakis and a blue dress shirt. He wears brown boots, but they are somehow dressy. His brown belt perfectly matches his shoes. He has a simple gray backpack. His hair is short with a mixture of gray and black. He is slightly crouched helping the other person down the aisle. The woman he is helping looks to be in her nineties. She takes tiny steps, a cane in one hand and the man in the other to help her keep her balance. She has extremely short white hair. She wears a long blue dress with a gray cardigan on top. She has big glasses and pearl earrings. To top off her outfit she has nice flat dress shoes.

"Ida," says Adeline rushing off the stage to meet the elder lady. "I am so glad you made it! How are you feeling?"

"I'm still walking," Ida responds with a high class french accent. "Although I should like to sit soon."

"Of course," Adeline says. She turns to the man, "Do you mind helping her up the stairs?"

"Yes, of course," he responds. "Where would you like to sit?" he asks her once they are on the stage.

Aspasia jumps to face you. "I think she is going to take the big gray chair."

"I agree, and I think he is going to take that simple leather square chair," you declare. You and Aspasia sit at the edges of your own chairs waiting patiently as Ida looks at her seating options.

"I'll take the chair over there," Ida says, pointing a bony finger towards the gray chair.

"Ha!" Aspasia says, turning to you with a grin. The man walks Ida to her chair, takes a quick glance at his chair options and then makes his way to the leather chair that you assumed he would take.

"This is too easy," you say with a smile turning to Aspasia.

“Three more to go,” she responds. The two of you refocus on the scene down below once again.

“Thank you for helping Ida,” Adleine says, making her way to the man.

“Oh it was my pleasure,” he says while shaking her hand. “Garrick Harlow, department chair at Coromack University.”

“Nice to meet you. We are glad that you were able to make it,” Adeline says with one of the first genuine looking smiles that you have seen from her.

“Hello, is this the convention on Aspasia?” All heads turn towards the entrance.

“Yes it is,” Adeline says, raising her voice to ensure the woman in the doorway could hear her.

“Ahh perfect,” the woman says. “Hello everyone. I am here to discuss Aspasia. I have many things I want to say.” Nobody responds as they stare at the woman walking down the aisle. Mary’s jaw is on the floor. Valentina is covering her mouth. Michael is squinting through his thick glasses.

The woman makes her way down the aisle dragging a red wagon behind her. She is wearing a black dress with big scissors pasted on top. The blades of the scissors create a v-line neckline and the finger loops of the scissors create pockets on the dress. There are little scissors scattering the rest of the dress. She has on the thickest, comically large, black glasses. Her brown hair is extremely frizzy, shooting in all directions. You turn to Aspasia.

“She is like if Ms. Frizzle was on crack,” you say.

“Who?” Aspasia looks at you perplexed.

“Doesn’t matter,” you say waving a hand and looking back at the scene below. The woman has reached the stairs. She looks around for a moment, turns around and starts walking up the stairs backwards pulling the wagon with her.

“Do you want help with that?” Adeline asks, startling out of her stunned state.

“No, I can do it,” replies the lady. The wagon clanks up the stairs as everyone stares. When she gets to the top she leans over and catches her breath.

“Feel free to sit where you want,” Adeline says, breaking the silence. You and Aspasia turn to each other.

“Yellow chair!” Aspasia says right as you say “Sun chair!”

“How is this so easy?” Aspasia comments.

“More importantly, how are we going to determine who wins?” you add on. Aspasia shrugs. “You will just have to mess up,” she says with a smirk.

Neither you nor Aspasia are surprised when the woman chooses the yellow chair. After settling down, the woman pulls out a roll of yarn from her wagon and starts knitting. You and Aspasia give each other a knowing look. Valentina stares at the woman who is now sitting next to her. Valentina closes her mouth, looks around, straightens up and refocuses on her computer.

“Hello, I’m Adeline Jackson,” Adeline says as she approaches the woman.

“Hello, I am Diana Stuart,” says the woman. She looks at Adeline for a moment before turning back to her knitting. Adeline stands awkwardly before turning on her heels and going back to her seat. The room is so quiet you could hear a pin drop.

“I am glad you haven’t started yet.” All eyes turn towards the speaker. A woman, probably in her sixties, is walking down the aisle as if it were a runway. Nobody notices that William has re-entered behind her. The woman’s gray hair is the only normal thing about her. She is decked out in silver jewelry: rings, necklaces, bracelets, you name it. She has thick circular red framed sunglasses on. She is carrying a large red purse in the dip of her elbow. Her outfit consists of red heeled boots, blue trousers, an orange shirt and orange jacket. She walks up the stage and immediately goes to the red chair. She drops her bag to the floor and crosses her legs and she dramatically leans into the heart-shaped backrest.

Aspasia flops back into her chair catching your attention. “She did that too fast,” she says with disappointment. “I would have guessed that is where she was going to sit!” The woman below starts speaking, catching your attention.

“This is the Aspasia conference, I presume” asks the woman looking at everyone over the top of her sunglasses.

“This is,” Adeline says smiling but with her head cocked to the side.

“I am Dorris McNeil. Nice to meet all of you,” she says observing everyone in the room. “You all seem like an interesting group.”

“We seem interesting?” William says challenging Dorris as he puts the tables down on the stage. He looks around the room at the new participants. “I can’t believe this is happening,” he huffs under his breath as he makes his way to his chair.

“What’s his problem?” Dorris says, turning towards Mary. Mary smiles at the woman and shrugs.

“Top of the morning!” says a booming voice from the entrance.

“There is no way,” says William in disbelief. Valentina’s hand shoots up to cover her gawking mouth. The man who is now walking down the aisle is dressed to the nines. He is wearing a tweed suit with a trouser, vest, jacket, suit shirt, tie and trench coat. To complete the outfit, he wears a bowler hat, monocle, and pocketwatch. In one hand, he holds an elaborate wooden cane, and in the other he holds a black briefcase. His gray hair shoots in all directions from under his hat.

“This is the Aspasia conference, right?” He asks in an overly cheery British accent.

“You are in the right place,” Adeline says, slightly stunned. On the stage he makes his way to the remaining chair.

“What a fun group to make it despite the storm,” he says chuckling.

“Just to clarify,” William says standing, “everyone on this stage is here because they want to discuss Aspasia?” He makes eye contact with everyone, but his eyes linger on Dorris, Diana, and the new man. They all nod their heads in confirmation. He makes an exaggerated sigh and sits back down.

“What is your name?” Diedra asks, indicating to the new man.

“Oh,” he laughs. “Romulus Hawk, Lecturer at Oxforst University.”

“How lovely,” Dorris chimes in leaning forward, her elbow on her knee and her palm facing the sky as if she had a cigarette between her middle and forefinger. “A brit.”

“Nothing wrong with that darling,” replies Romulus. “I get the privilege of representing her majesty the queen. And what a privilege it is,” he says reminiscing. The room falls silent. All twelve chairs are now taken. Some people, like Michael, Romulus, Garrick, Mary, and Diana have their stuff splayed over the tables in front of them. Others, like Valentina and Ida, have nothing on the table. Everyone is taking each other in, sizing each other up.

“What is she typing?” Aspasia asks you, pointing towards Mary.

“It looks like she’s on Twitter,” you respond, recognizing the format on her phone, but it’s too far for you to read. You instinctively reach for your phone in your pocket and realize that it isn’t there. It dawns on you that you have not seen your phone since you woke up. “Well, I guess we will never know what she is saying. I don’t have my phone.”

“Their phone,” Aspasia says to the room and your phone appears on the table. She passes it to you. “Can you see what she is saying now?” You stare at her outstretched hand with your phone. *I am never going to get used to that.* Looking a moment longer, you snatch the phone from Aspasia.

You are about to open Twitter when you realize this is your ticket out. You quickly text your friend. The message fails to send. You go on Twitter and try to send a tweet asking for help. Service fails you once again.

“It’s not going to work,” you say to Aspasia with a sigh. “I can’t see what she is saying because I don’t have service.”

“Did you try looking at what she was saying or were you trying to escape?” Aspasia probes fully aware of what you were doing. You look at her guiltily then back at your phone.

“What did she say her name was again? Mary Crafton?” you ask Aspasia. She nods. You look her up on Twitter, and to your surprise, you find her account. You tap it and look at her most recent post.

“What are you smirking at?” Aspasia asks.

“She tweeted ‘Due to being snowed in at this frickin conference, you can vicariously enjoy everything I am going to go through. I am afraid that I will be dealing with a lot.’ Then she tweeted, ‘How is there already this much sexual tension??? It’s been like half an hour.’”

Aspasia looks down at Mary and laughs. “I like her,” she says. “Reminds me of Genevieve Auclair.”

Adeline’s voice rings from down below. “Okay, why don’t we get this conference started.”

Everyone on the stage adjusts in their seats stopping whatever they were doing. You adjust in your seat and take one last deep breath. *This is actually happening.* You close your eyes for just a second and then look at Aspasia. She smiles at you and you both turn your attention to the figures on the stage.