

FALLOW

What do I even do anymore? Anneth thought. She rocked slowly in her rocking chair, really trying to answer that question. *Kim does real estate, gets to show people around to new and different homes, peek a little bit into other homeowners' lives, and she still goes out drinking with some of the old gang. Howard rock climbs, out on real rocks with real ropes by himself, which is insane of him, man with one hand, but I get it, and it is a thing he does. He actually does things, in his life. I'm... what? Some woman who makes sure office supplies are on the shelves each day? And then comes home, and sits in front of a computer, playing computer games. Not even liking when there's an update to the computer games. I grind levels on the same dungeons that have been in the games for the last, what, five years, longer for some of them. Actually. Actually longer than that for all of them: most are older than ten years, of doing the same dungeons, just grinding. Why? I don't think about anything, at all, while I'm playing. Is that why? So that I can not think? Or is that a side effect that I haven't realized and unpacked until just now? Here's another question: When is the last time anything new happened? Prior to last Friday, of course. Before that, when was the last time there was novelty in my life? When was the last time I noticed anything? Literally anything. A... a nice sunset, or, an interesting smell. When was the last time I had a witty observation, even to myself? I don't think I could if I tried. When was the last time I had an actual conversation? Not telling someone what to do at*

work or being told what to do at work. Not direct messaging other players in the games I play, telling them things they might not have known about the games. When was the last time I talked to a friend? Do I have friends? Or, do I only have friends who I used to have? Fuck, when was the last time I was happy? I'm not unhappy. Well. I'm... What do I even do anymore? It's since Myrtle died. What have I done since Myrtle died, twenty years ago?

She let that thought hang for a while, sat with it. Even the most precious memories of time spent with the palomino were so simplified now. Some flat notion of standing at the mare's head, and the mare leaning her head against her. Some note to self that she was supposed to remember all of the moments of brushing the mare, and both of them liking that. The weight that those things had had on her then was sincere. The most sincere things Anneth had felt in her life. But the other life in that equation had come to a natural end.

I didn't die too, Anneth told herself. I very specifically did not kill myself, and that was really on the table, and I didn't. Shit, I transitioned, that was quite an accomplishment. I got help for anxiety. I've been surviving. Maybe I'm not happy. Maybe I am post happiness, now. But I am surviving. Even if it's not that interesting to tell someone about. Even if the day to day is one-note.

She was putting it off.

Anneth knocked her open palm against the arm of her rocking chair about twenty times, and then hit the speed dial button for her boss. As the line rang, she rocked in the chair. She looked out at her back yard, the back yard of her townhouse, and tried to force some observation about it. Something nice. She saw the wind shaking the neighbor's trees, and the birds and squirrels hopping around in the branches. That was a nice image on its own, she supposed. It did not need any deep addition on her part. It was just nice to see the pretty critters running around and flying. It was a nice thing in front of her.

The line was answered. "What's up Anneth?"

No delaying it with small talk then. Anneth jumped right into it. "Jane, hey. I'm going to have an absence coming up."

With no pause at all, Jane shot back, "How soon?"

“Like, now,” Anneth stammered out, before a more tactful way of saying it came to mind. She rocked back and forth quickly in the rocking chair, though, nothing about that should have been audible through the line at least, which was good enough. She figured she looked like a crazy person. She quickly explained, “I got a summons. I can’t be in starting tomorrow, and I’d count me out for a full week after that too.”

“It is *December!*” Jane said, the harshness of it causing the audio on the line to peak out on the word ‘December.’ In a more modulated whisper into the receiver, Jane added, “We are good enough to get by on seasonal shifts we’ve been able to get on board, but I cannot be out a floor manager and you know that.”

“Jane,” Anneth shot back. Standing her ground wasn’t common for Anneth, but she knew the fuck how to do it. “I don’t have a choice. You know I’ve called in *two days* the entire five years I’ve worked here, and I even wish I wouldn’t have had to do those. I do not get *joy* in telling you I can’t come in, but like I said, I have a summons, it is frankly not my choice right now.”

“Wait,” Jane said, “like a...” She trailed off, and then sighed as the words escaped her. “What kind?”

“Chronuous,” Anneth answered. “It’s the real thing.”

“I thought you were...” Jane began, and then cut herself off before she said something very rude. Discriminatory, someone from HR might be willing to describe it as if backed into the right corner. Anneth metaphorically patted herself on the back for calling Jane by the company line, instead of the bitch’s mobile.

“You thought I was what?” Anneth drilled in sweetly, not willing to waive Jane’s partial statement away if this was going to be part of a record.

Jane quickly backtracked, no doubt picking up on all of the same implications. “I just haven’t had to do the forms for anyone getting any kind of summons in a long time.”

“Understandable,” Anneth said, seeing no harm to herself in conceding whether or not that particular information seemed true.

After a little pause, Jane said, “What day is the summons for?”

Anneth saw through it instantly, and really wasn't willing to concede the ground. Answering that question was heading straight into give an inch, take a mile territory. Instead, Anneth said, "No um, I really have to call in a disability privilege. I really can't be in for the week, and, I'm telling you now that I don't hope to extend that but I am reserving the possibility of it. My anxiety hasn't been... out of control... in years... but this did it. I'm going to be in and out of therapy, and..."

Thankfully, really surprisingly, Jane actually did say the line that she was, in theory, required to: "Take the time you have to. We'll figure it all out here."

And that was about the end of it. Anneth considered asking if she was already fired, but knew that the answer wouldn't be honest either way. If she was fired, she would figure something out after the fact. If she wasn't fired, well, that was easier, her schedule would return to normal in a couple of weeks, probably. For the next week, what mattered was that she was free.

It was a Sunday afternoon as she had made the call to Jane. She had seen the letter on the previous Friday evening, and had, admittedly, avoided opening it for a large amount of the weekend. Purple envelope, and a black stamp on the face of it of an hourglass. Correspondences from the gods were a suicidal kind of thing to fake. It was almost assuredly real, and yet, it was so unexpected to Anneth that she still grappled with the reality of it.

What Anneth's boss had just barely stopped herself from saying out loud, the thing that would have been very rude to point out, was that some people were never contacted by the gods. 'Untouchables' was among the more polite names for them. And it had, in fairness, seemed to Anneth and everyone who knew her that she was one of those people. She was approaching forty and had never been summoned before, even by the more accessible gods. Hermes, Cupid. It was common enough for someone to be summoned by Chronos at one point sometime in their life, to be called away to some point in the past. But it was also common enough for someone to never be called.

Others seemed to be personal favorites of the god of time. Some lived lives in a very confused order, always backward and

forward, even intersecting with themselves as a regularity. The second most of the same person in the same place as himself was a filmed porno, where seven of the same man, Luke T., engaged in an orgy together. The importance of it or the lack thereof was studied and debated at length among religious scholars. The first most of the same person in the same place as himself was 9/11, where videos placed at least 45 of the same man, Jeremy Lucas, at the scene, helping to rescue survivors. Going forward in time was exceptionally rare: four people were documented to have done it, and each of those instances had been of a duration that did not exceed five seconds.

Anneth did not assume she was being summoned to be a part of anything so notable. The surprise, for her, was that it was happening at all. The letter from Chronos contained very little, as was usually the case. It had the time and date she was to show up at the temple, which was noon on the Wednesday that followed the Friday she had received the letter on. It had a brief, standardized statement saying that the nature of the visit was to have her be translocated in time, and that her participation was not compulsory but strongly encouraged.

Anneth had to scroll through her texting history for some time to find the number of the reception for her old therapist. It had been eight, nine years since she had last talked to him. Doctor Holland. He had helped her overcome a lot, back then, but there had come a point where there hadn't really been anything left to talk about between them. She was better, so to speak. She was done. They were done. But now, they were back on at his next availability. At first the receptionist had texted back saying that the doctor was booked up for the next three weeks, but within two minutes, she had sent a follow-up text saying that something had freed up, and the doctor could make an appointment with her tomorrow, Monday, 2:20 PM, preferably nothing that would go over into the doctor's three o'clock. Anneth confirmed the appointment, avoiding commenting to the receptionist how just-so all of that seemed, or, more honestly, how inconsiderate it was to lie about the doctor's scheduling to someone who was seeking mental health help, only to find out that the doctor would be willing to make time, and so have to make up a pretense as to why the

unworkable situation had suddenly become workable. She decided to move beyond looking a gift horse in the mouth, there.

The following Monday at 2:23 PM, she was sitting in a couch in an office that smelled like cinnamon candles. The walls were lined with bookshelves full of nonfiction textbooks and fiction novels. She faced a bookshelf mostly full of sci-fi novels, as Doctor Holland sat on a chair side-by-side with her couch, facing the bookshelf alongside her.

In some ways, she had worried the conversation would have to begin with why she hadn't kept in touch over the last near-decade. She had come in ready to admit she had assumed it would be inconsiderate to take up his time and act like a friend when their relationship had been formed on a more professional basis. But when she had come in, he had opened with such a sincere expression of happiness, and a very warm, "It's so good to see you again!" It had made her realize very quickly that there was no animosity, he was not mad at her. They caught up. Both of them had overall been doing very good since the last time they had talked. Anneth then divulged that the reason she had come in was because of the purple letter she had received, with the image of the hourglass on it, marked for two days from then, the following Wednesday.

The doctor began to ask questions about that. In some ways, Anneth always wanted to criticize his questions for being cliché, obvious, even though the questions were exactly fit to purpose, exactly what they were supposed to be.

"How do you feel about getting the summons?" the doctor asked.

"Nervous. Extremely nervous. I don't even... I can barely talk. I don't know what to..." She tried to put a cap on the thought, and couldn't. In many ways she did hope to wrap this up quickly, and not take up the doctor's time waffling about her feelings. She did want to get to the root of it. But evidently she was not there herself yet. Hence the visit. But she did want to get to the root of it quickly, if possible.

The doctor asked, "Do you think you'll go to the summons?"

"Yes. Oh gods, you think I would miss it? I'm worried... I'm worried I might mess it up, I think? But I know that doesn't make sense."

In a friendly tone, the doctor agreed, "It is comforting that these things are preordained, isn't it? But we don't always worry about things that make sense. Sometimes we can worry anyways."

"Sure. But then what am I worried about?"

"Well. Do you have any ideas?"

Anneth sighed through her nose.

The doctor suggested it another way. "What do you worry will happen?"

"I..." Anneth thought about it. "I guess I'm not worried I'll, I don't know, create some problem in time itself. That doesn't... well, I couldn't, I think, even if I wanted to for some reason, which I don't. I'm not worried I'll screw it up *that* bad. I'm just worried I won't live up to what I'm supposed to be for this."

"Mm," the doctor intoned. He thought for a moment himself, it seemed, and then asked, "Where do you think the summons will take you? What time, who will you meet, what will you do?"

"I have a guess," Anneth said. She felt her cheeks start to burn up a little, and presaged an awkwardness at even being able to say it out loud. She had told this doctor about her past relationship. She had been very open with talking about it. At one point she had been open about it with a lot of people. But she did not currently make a habit of talking about it with anyone. It had, incidentally, been a long time now since it had ever come up. Without intending to, she talked around it at first. "I know it won't be myself."

"Never met yourself?" the doctor asked.

"No," Anneth answered. She then asked, as it had actually never come up before, "Have you?"

"Myself and I have had a couple of very nice dinners, but I have to admit, I wouldn't stop going on about music trivia," the doctor said, and then laughed at himself. "You know what's the worst? One of those dinners, I've now been on both ends of, and I could feel myself doing it, but it couldn't be helped."

Anneth laughed at that herself, not faking it. She was very amused at the idea of the doctor being awkward. "I didn't even know you liked music that much."

"I really don't, but I know that I'm going to talk my own ear off at least three more times about it anyways."

“Oh no,” Anneth said, lightheartedly.

“There was some other good advice to myself in there too, to be fair. Stuff that sent me on what I would like to call a good life path. It was all very specific to things I needed to hear at the time, nothing that’s not a life skill you don’t already have. But that was peppered in among quite, quite a lot of rock band trivia. The one of those I can say I have delivered now, I believe I was phrasing it the way I did to attempt to make the metaphors stick to a less wise self who needed the help.” Doctor Holland cleared his throat. “So, you’ve never met yourself,” he said, circling back. “But you have some idea of who it might be that you’re meeting in the summons?”

“Yes.”

“If you write it down on a paper first, can I take a guess?” the doctor asked.

That caught Anneth by surprise, the idea of that. “Oh. Sure. Do you have...”

The doctor ripped a page out of a spiral bound notebook, and handed it to Anneth along with a pen.

Anneth wrote down the name, glancing over to make sure the doctor wasn’t peeking. The doctor had indeed turned his head away to face the wall.

“I wrote it,” Anneth said, having already folded the paper a few times as well, to obscure the name farther.

“Myrtle?” the doctor asked.

Anneth unfolded the paper and showed it to the doctor, revealing the name *Myrtle* freshly written in her handwriting. “I’m surprised you remembered,” she said, and then added, cutting the doctor off slightly, “I don’t mean anything by that, I just, I’m bad with names, I’m surprised you could remember the name this long after.”

“We talked about her a lot,” the doctor said. “I might not remember every story, I’m sorry, but yes, I remember her name, absolutely. You think you’re going to see her?”

“Nothing else would be as important as that,” Anneth answered. “And it’s not myself. So.”

The doctor let a silence hang.

Anneth finished, “So yes, I think I’m going to see Myrtle.”

The doctor asked, “And you’re worried about that?”

“Yes,” Anneth answered. “Oh gods, I can barely... yes, I’m more nervous than I’ve been in... I’ve never been this nervous as an adult. I’m serious. It’s not a *bad* thing that I would get to see her again, not at all, obviously. But how can... how can she be dead, and then I get to see her alive again for what, a few minutes? How is that supposed to happen and it won’t fuck me up? How could I make enough of that? That’s impossible. I...”

Anneth began to tear up, not even having suspected she was going to, herself.

The doctor handed her a box of tissues, and set a waste basket beside her.

Anneth took out a tissue to wipe her eyes with, and then balled it up when she was done and put it in the waste basket.

“I’m sorry,” she choked out.

“It’s okay,” he said.

A silence hung in the air.

Anneth broke the silence by saying openly, “I don’t know what to say.”

“It’s difficult,” the doctor said. “What would you want to say to her, if you had the chance?”

“Don’t—” Anneth began with a tone, and then cut herself off. She started again, still harshly, but not overly combative, “Don’t talk down to me about what me and her shared.”

“Of course,” the doctor said. “I’m sorry. My impression of your relationship with her is very high. I understand that your feelings towards her are very loving.”

Anneth laughed bitchily to herself.

Sounding surprised himself, the doctor asked, “Was there something other than loving in that relationship?”

“No. I mean, we annoyed each other sometimes, but, who doesn’t? No. At the time it was... she was the center of my world. Getting her out to run each day, bringing her new things to try, going on our rides. I didn’t listen to what anyone else said for more hours in a day than with her. That was... we loved each other. But that was then. That was... a really long time ago. About twenty years.”

“Oh. Your feelings have changed since?”

“Not changed, just...” Anneth felt herself becoming choked up. She readied another tissue, but more tears didn’t come. She

held the tissue in a tight fist. “The part of my life where I loved her, was...” Anneth couldn’t finish it other than to repeat herself: “a really long time ago.”

The doctor adjusted in his chair, and then said, delicately, but firmly, “The reason I wanted to ask what you would say to her wasn’t because I wanted to hear a platitude from you, like ‘I would say to her I love you,’ or ‘I would say to her I’ve missed her.’ I think, and you can let me know if I’m wrong, but I think I do understand how heartfelt your position on her is, and I’m not trying to step over that like it isn’t a big deal. I only wanted to ask what you would say to her because if you’re anxious about meeting her again, and you think that you are going to meet her again, then that’s an obstacle that might be troubling you.”

Anneth nodded. “Sure. I think I would just tell her I love her though.”

“Okay,” the doctor said. “Anything else?”

Anneth threw up her arms. “Play it by ear, I guess. If she wants to run circles, we’ll run circles. If she wants to go on a ride, we’ll go on a ride.”

“Is there anything you would like to do with her?”

Anneth covered her sudden smile with the tissue she was still holding. “I don’t have the equipment for that anymore.”

The doctor chuckled along, and said, “Ah, fair enough. It sounds like whatever comes, you’re planning to make the best of it.”

“Yeah,” Anneth said.

“I think that’s all anyone should expect from someone,” the doctor offered.

Anneth nodded. “Maybe. Gods. This is still just...”

The conversation went on, but mostly consisted of circling back to the same topics, finding other ways of saying the same things. Anneth worried that she had moved on from the palomino so completely that she had forgotten her, that the feelings had become too distant, that meeting her again would not live up to the miraculous nature of such a thing getting to happen. By the time she thanked the doctor and they agreed that it was a good place to put an end to the session, Anneth had not gotten as far as no longer being nervous, but she did believe she was ready to appear at the appointment at the temple of

Chronos without being a complete wreck. And as for what would happen on the other side, it was like she had said. She would play it by ear.

That Wednesday, in the morning, she dressed in comfortable jeans and a flannel top, and packed a satchel with two pears. Bringing items back and forth through time was only prohibited if deemed exploitative, and the priests were guided to be permissive in their judgment. She made the drive to the temple much earlier than she was scheduled to arrive, and parked in the lot outside. In a nearby courtyard there was a fountain. She sat on a bench and looked idly at the water, it flying up and splashing down. She wanted to reflect on dear memories of time with her soulmate, as she looked at the fountain. But nothing more substantial came to her than the dim memories she always had. She sat staring at the fountain, and only that. She had to force herself to not zone even that out. When it was time, she entered the sliding doors of the temple.

Standing inside, there was a priest in a white robe. He smiled at her. “Anneth Williams. Thank you for coming.”

She nodded. “Of course. Is there um... where do we do this?”

“Follow me,” he invited, and turned and walked deeper into the temple. The halls had white walls, and at intervals were hung framed works of art, quite a lot of the art depicting architecture or weather.

Anneth and the priest arrived at a room that made Anneth think of a classroom. There were no desks, or lectern. It was likely only the size of the room that made her think of it. She tried to think of other rooms that were that size. There were probably plenty. But she couldn’t think of any others at that moment. This room, the room in the temple, was a room of grey bricks, and no other features. The fluorescent lights in the hall outside cast the only light into the dim room.

The priest led her to the room’s center. “Stand here. Face the doorway. Close your eyes. Okay. Keep your eyes closed as I depart. It will happen shortly.”

She heard the priest walking away, and then the sound of the door closing.

Immediately after the door had closed, the sound of cicadas buzzing filled the air, and the world smelled of grass and dirt

and water. Anneth opened her eyes. She was outside, in the nighttime, standing on a little grassy finger of land that jutted out to encroach meagerly on a large lake. A crescent moon hung overhead. Anneth turned around, and around, and didn't see a palomino anywhere.

From the edge of the water, past a bush that was farther out on the finger of land, a deep voice called to all who might hear it, "Is someone there?"

"Oh," Anneth said, realization causing her spirits to sink. "You have got to be fucking kidding me."

"Excuse me?" the punk said. 'Man' wasn't the right word. Maybe for two reasons, but at the very least, for the reason that the person with the deep voice was still an insolent shit, not fully matured, still didn't know enough about the very basics of the world for 'man' to not at least come with some footnotes. This was herself.

"Hey Nick," Anneth called past the bush.

"Who the fuck," the punk said to himself, but still loudly, and then stood up, emerging from the incidental cover.

The dude wasn't bad looking. She had to give that much to her past self. He had some things working against him, most notably a black pencil moustache, but his features around it were handsome, very Dean-esque. It looked like he still had the black leather jacket at that point, because, well, he was wearing it. She didn't know where that had ever ended up.

"I don't know where to begin," she said to her other self. To him. To Nick. Thinking about what she wanted, in light of the fact that this was not who she had been hoping to see, she supposed that, now, all she wanted to do was impart whatever lesson, whatever information, it was that her past self needed now, at this moment. Get it over with, whatever it was that she was here to do for him. She supposed she would start with the basics. "I'm from 2023."

"Oh," he said. The information seemed to have a softening effect on him, taken the edge off of his rather hostile demeanor that had been present until that point. "Are you someone I know already, yet?"

"I'm you, loser."

“Pffff!” Nick said, and then turned and paced alongside the water, laughing to himself. “I don’t know who you *actually* are but that’s funny.”

“Why’s that, Nick?”

“Easy, I’m a dude,” Nick said, pointing to himself with both pointer fingers. “I’m a dude on the outside and I’m not not a dude on the inside. Being a dude is the fucking best. Why would anyone *want* to be a woman?”

“You’d be surprised. But you know what, part of that is true, you’re not transgender. Not yet.”

“Wuzzat?” Nick asked.

“Wuzz what?” Anneth mocked.

“Transgender.”

“Oh gods I was a moron.”

“Hey! Even if I don’t believe you that is not very nice!”

“Look,” Anneth said, “we can prove this.”

“Oh yeah, how?”

“You’re...” Anneth looked Nick up and down, trying to gauge it. She was surprised she wasn’t even good at placing herself in terms of age, but she took a shot at it. “You are at least seventeen.”

Nick looked at her like she was an idiot. “Twenty two,” he said, pretty bitterly.

“Oh,” Anneth said. Well, damn. That changed things quite a lot, from where she thought this was at. “I’m sorry.”

“Why?”

Because that put him, currently, in a very dark place he had been in, in the few years after Myrtle had died. She hesitated to even bring that up, though. What did she have to say to him about it? It clearly wasn’t anything that had helped, if she didn’t even remember having had this meeting with a stranger at night by a lake. And at this particular moment, the guy seemed to be in what would have been a better than usual mood, overall.

“If you’re twenty two, I know who you lost a couple years ago,” she said.

“It wasn’t a secret, that doesn’t make you special.”

“No, I know. That isn’t what I was going to bring up, I just didn’t know that had happened yet, and, I’m sorry. I really know how it is right now.”

“Yeah, well.” Nick shrugged.

“But, my point,” Anneth brought back up, “is that you’re older than fifteen, when you got Howard to give you a tramp stamp of Bender the robot lying seductively and burping fire.”

Nick suddenly snorted, and doubled over, wheezing out laughter, barely able to breathe. In the breaths he could get out, he mocked, “There’s no way... you...”

His words trailed off as Anneth loosened her belt, turned around, and lifted up the back of her flannel, showing the exact tattoo that Nick assuredly had. Well. She had actually gotten it touched up, since, but it was the same lines Howard had done, in the parlor they’d broken into that night.

“Nooooo fucking way,” Nick muttered.

“Fraid so,” Anneth said, and then hiked her pants back up again, and faced herself once more.

Nick’s eyes darted all over her, seeming to take her in for real now. He seemed afraid of her, actually. All the implications. Really the one main implication, but, that one was nothing that had started to be on Nick’s mind yet, not for a couple more years, at least. Anneth let out a little huff of a laugh, actually. She really was such a fucking dude back then, back now. She, he, had taken masculinity by the horns. First to jump to the challenge at any implication that he wasn’t the best at something: the number of times arm wrestling had happened at lunch tables well into high school was stupid as fuck, but she remembered the fun he had had in that, because he was really good at it, really strong, and almost always won. The feeling of winning, of impressing people, he sought that out so much. He and Myrtle had been insatiable in riding competitions. She was a competitor type too. He and she, they got each other on that. He had been asked in literal interviews how he pushed the palomino so hard when he seemed to be doing nothing. It was because she wanted to give things her all too, and her all was very, very, very impressive without him needing to act for an audience like he was the one pulling that spirit out of her. The way they would fuck after a victory, her thing giving rapture to his thing, his thing giving rapture to hers, celebrating in their winning, they were champions, the most incredible soulmates in the world.

Nick, twenty two and with that kind of fire dying from him quickly, asked, "So what do you want? Cause I've kinda been feeling done with things, and I'm surprised to see I live more than another year."

"I don't know, dude. You get through things? It gets better than this right here?"

"Does it?" Nick asked. "What do you do now?"

Anneth let out a long puff of air that flapped her lips. "Yeah not much. Shit."

Nick made a pointedly unimpressed hum, and then took a flask out of his jacket, and had a drink.

"Tch! Oh, come on!" Anneth said, only just realizing what should have been a given, given that Nick was at that point in his life. "You're drunk!"

"Guilty."

"You are actually blacked out right now!"

"That is a possibility, random crazy woman who is apparently me."

"Wow, so that's... huh," Anneth said, and then laughed once to herself. "That does explain some things. But then... what could possibly be the point of this? You're not going to remember this, at all, I can tell you that already. Come tomorrow this is just *gone*, from your perspective. Huh." Anneth thought on that. "So I guess this is for me? That seems wrong."

"Maybe this is the gods' last ditch effort to remind you of your old ways and save you from cutting your schlong off."

"Oh that ship has sailed."

"What!"

"Can I wear that jacket?"

"Does something happen to the jacket too!"

"Maybe. But come on. I actually like *part* of that idea that you said, about reminding me of old things. I wanna wear the jacket again."

"It is the best," Nick said. He took another sip from the flask, set it down on the grass, and then did begin taking the jacket off.

Anneth unshouldered the satchel she had packed, with the two pears. She suppressed letting out a sigh of sadness at something about that.

“What’s that?” Nick asked, looking down at the satchel. He handed the jacket out to his later self.

“Oh, it’s a couple of pears I brought. If you want one—”

“I bet I can throw one farther than you.”

Anneth let out a sharp laugh. “Ohhh wow, you are so what you are.”

“Hundred percent. Well, I’m drinking Fireball right now which is actually weak as shit, it’s like, thirty percent, but I was drinking other stuff earlier.”

Anneth took the jacket, and put it on. It had been big on Nick, so it still fit her, actually pretty perfectly, even with breasts in lieu of abs, arms that were all around a lot less less muscle, a bit more cushion. It took her back. She wore it pretty damn often. It was what enshelled her, him, in the crisp mornings in the stable, as his breath and an assertive palomino’s both produced clouds in front of themselves. So often, they came close enough, stayed close enough, to where their clouds were one combined effort, breathing in each other’s vapor, having each other’s breath.

Nick rummaged clumsily through the satchel and grabbed out the pears, and handed one to Anneth.

“You’re really serious about throwing them,” Anneth said. She had meant it to be a question, but the answer was so apparent that she couldn’t maintain the interrogative tone for the entirety of the sentence, and it fell out as a somewhat defeated statement, which wasn’t entirely what she had meant for it to be either, she was amused by him, her old self, more than any other feeling, but the words had come out a little bit wrongly.

“You can stand ten steps farther ahead than me,” Nick offered.

“Fuck no, we’re gonna do this even, let’s go,” Anneth said, and walked with her pear to the edge of the water, at the end of the finger of land. The vast open lake laid before them, black water barely perceptible in the light of the crescent moon. Nick came up to stand beside her. The both of them scooted their feet, looking down at them in the dark, to make sure that each of them had the frontmost part of the frontmost toe even with each other’s.

Anneth tossed her pear up and down in her hand a couple of times, feeling the weight of it, and then hurled it out into the water, where it made a splash.

“Oh damn,” she said. “I actually didn’t think I would still be able to throw that far.”

“That was honestly respectable,” Nick agreed.

Nick then hurled his pear out into the water. It went far enough out that Anneth lost sight of it, and only heard the splash.

“You win, good job,” Anneth said.

Nick gave a weird laugh, some kind of half snarling gloat, Anneth wasn’t even sure what her old self was going for with it.

“I like this,” Anneth said. Her old jacket. Hanging out with, well, a more animated self, even if it was from a place of him doing very badly. “Kiss me,” she said.

“Um,” he said back. Slowly, he said, “I have never kissed a human before.”

Anneth shrugged. “Yeah I know. Neither have I. But I know what this is now. I’m getting reignited. So spread the fire.”

“I ain’t got no fire left, since Myrtle’s gone.”

“Well, you’re drinking Fireball, so you’re more on fire than I am.”

Nick gave that snarling laugh again, and then said, “Sure,” and wrapped an arm around the back of her neck, and went in for a big, long kiss. It felt silly, kissing a human, but she gave herself over to it, let his lips peck and suck on her lips, let his tongue slide in and run between her upper lip and her teeth. It seemed like he might have just been getting started when suddenly, he was gone, and she was in a dark room.

She walked through the dark towards the door, and opened it to see the priest standing outside in the hall.

She said to him, in an excited whisper, because the place seemed so quiet, compared to all the buzzing of cicadas, “It happened!”

“I can see,” the priest said with an amused smile, looking down at her chest.

Anneth followed his gaze down at herself, and realized, after a moment, that she had come back wearing the leather jacket.

“Oh. OH.”

The priest chuckled. He did not pry on details as they walked back out, though Anneth did volunteer some of it, saying she had met herself, and it had gone well, it had been good. The priest seemed glad to hear it, and wished her a nice day at the front door.

Anneth stood outside in the sun for a moment, giving her eyes a sec to adjust to the bright glare reflecting off of everything on that cloudless noon. As she stood she thrust her hands into her jacket pockets, and it was then that she discovered the phone resting in the left pocket, with a screen that was cracked in one corner. Her breath stopped. Leaving a hand on the phone in the pocket, she walked quickly to her car, and got in. Only there, where she wouldn't have a chance of dropping it on the concrete, did she take Nick's phone out of the jacket pocket, and press the unlock button. She tapped in the passcode. It was one she no longer used, too obvious. Six digits. And then she was in. Seeing the home screen background alone caused tears to strike her. It was a selfie of Nick and Myrtle, taken by Nick of course, with Myrtle nosing over his shoulder, nuzzling against the side of his head. It called back to mind the closeness of the mare, the weight of a mare pressing her head against her human.

She went into the photos, and looked through them, every one that had that palomino. It was like getting to say goodbye. No. It was like getting to say I loved you. No. It was like getting to say I loved you then, and I love you now, and you have shaped me and the result of you on me will never leave me, and goodbye. When she had looked at everything, she pressed the lock button on the phone, and wondered if she might not ever choose to look at it again, since she had gotten what she had needed to, less or more.

The following day in Doctor Holland's office, after they had talked about some of the other things, she told him, "I'm gonna start dating again. Maybe humans. Maybe not even looking for love, but just to meet people. I'm just gonna go to things. Bars, live music, the state fair. I'm just gonna get out and do things again."