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### Hand In Glove

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# HAND IN GLOVE

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree  
Bachelor of Science, Global Leadership Studies

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# 1

After the stranger ties a blindfold around her head and leads her to the edge of the cliff, Indy turns around and gives a wide-grinned thumbs-up to the camera.

“Hi!” she yells over the rush of the water below. “I’m Indy Kirkwood, and I join cults so you don’t have to.”

Distantly, the cameraman gives his seal of approval. “Cut! Great shot. Fantastic. Let’s readjust so we can get the jump, everyone.”

With her eyes covered, every sensation feels supercharged. The sharp smell of salt. Gossamer sweat pooling at her temples. Gusts of wind yanking at her ponytail. The crunch of the rocky cliff below her, digging into her bare soles. The din of the camera crew rustling around her.

Then, she shifts, refocuses on the task at hand: a trust exercise, devised by her latest subjects. This, she’s been told, is a rite of passage for new recruits. She feels the gentle pull of rough, warm hands guiding her on either side, taking in a deep, shuddering breath. The group they’re studying this month is a collective of sun-fried adventurers, extreme survivalists who believe that the ocean holds the secrets to surviving the apocalypse. The sunniest, most optimistic group of doomsdayers she’s met yet, mostly adrenaline-junkie retirees with an off-the-grid ethos. She feels the freshly caught fish from lunch threatening to resurface, and swallows, grounding herself in the solid rock beneath her feet. Behind her, a production assistant, a girl barely out of high school, reaches around and straps a small camera to Indy’s chest. It’s such an unexpected sensation that it makes Indy jolt, making her guides tighten their grip. She squeaks out an apology, which Indy brushes off with a *you’re fine*-- more of a promise to herself than the PA.

“Trust the water. Trust that she will hold you, as she has held us,” a voice says to her left: the leader’s wife, Lottie.

“Translation: run like crazy and don’t think about it,” their leader, Will, a tanned man in his fifties, says to her right. Indy smiles. “Ready?” he asks.

Indy shakes her head yes, even though her hands are balled in fists so tightly her nails leave crescent-shaped marks on her palm. This is the precarious balancing act of television: swallowing deeply human emotion for the sake of shocking, dauntless courage. She feels Lottie and Will let go in tandem and step to the side, and, as instructed, takes a running start. Her foot finds the edge, a fleeting moment of security; in the next step, her foot hits nothing, scrambles for purchase in the air. She finds herself suspended in midair for a split second before taking a sheer drop that feels minutes

long. She hits the water-- or, the water hits *her*, really-- faster than she knows how to handle, pressing in all sides. In a miraculous and menacing feat, the blindfold is somehow still on. For a moment, she does let the water hold her, as Lottie directed, relaxing into its grip. Her shirt billows around her, light and floaty despite the feeling of heaviness and pressure. The shock of cold pulses first in the numbness of her fingertips, then spreads through her whole body. The water's way of letting her go.

Resurfacing with a gasp, she relishes in the comfort of noise after being wrapped in the water's eerie stillness. She takes the chance to whip the wet fabric off her face, and squints at the brightness around her. She looks up, blocking the sun with her hand.

Above her, the cult members are raucously celebrating, a tanned mass of silhouettes against the bright sunlight. A loud, daring few start jumping in after her.

Over the commotion, she hears Jared, head of the crew, yelling something incomprehensible.

"What?" Indy yells back.

He cups his hands over his mouth, leaving space between each word. "Don't hate me, but can you do that again?"

Indy rolls her eyes and dips back under the water, pretending to drown herself.

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Months later, in a quiet pocket of the city, Indy chews on the leftover ice from her coffee and imagines all the ways she could disappear.

As a child, she always wondered why the "Do not touch" signs were in place at museums-- the temptation grew with every new addition to their local modern art gallery, where her mother was an assistant curator. Wild, whorled brushstrokes, smatterings of glitter, delicious, pastel landscapes that looked as light and fluffy as sorbet. Labels beside them always bearing whimsical names, a promise of adventure.

To leap into the folds of a book. To be told her real parents were royalty, somewhere else, somewhere far away. All tiny acts of defiance she fantasized about for hours on end, hoping for anywhere but Nowhere, Indiana. Hoping that if she could touch a painting, just once, she could escape into its world for a little bit, live amidst medieval princesses and Jackson Pollock splatter-paint whimsy.

Now, here, twenty-odd years later, standing in line in the MoMA in the middle of the day, taking a long, leisurely, stomach-churning lunch break before her afternoon premiere, she finds

herself back in that childlike, relentless want for escapism. In exactly an hour, her ground-breaking show on one of the most dangerous cults in the world will be released to the public, and her life may or may not be over as she knows it.

She's devised a very *Indy* (delightfully inconvenient, adventurous, practical-yet-impractical) plan to be fashionably late: waiting in line for an interactive performance art piece. The crowd is a gaggle of all sorts: Wall Street businessmen, college students, elderly tourists. The exhibit is titled *Shared Breath*, by the artist Archer Fagan. She knows next to nothing about it, guided only by the glowing, brief review of her kooky art-world friend, Jacqueline: "I cried. You *have* to go."

The bare-bones inscription on the wall reads: *Allow me to offer you a moment of pause from our deeply busy world. A place of rest and reprieve.*

Indy watches a few emerge from the other side, wiping their eyes, marveling, glowing. She obsessively checks the time even as she's trying to evade it.

Minutes later, when it's finally her turn to slip through the unmarked door, she sacrifices her purse to a security guard. Thankfully, her phone is tucked into an inner jacket pocket.

Through a small, dimly lit hallway, she enters a bright, stark, white-walled, high-ceilinged room. At a table in the center sits a woman around her age, beautiful in an arresting, jarring way. A thick head of shockingly crimson hair, long and parted down the middle, angular features, a smattering of freckles across her nose. The sun cut across the front of her dress, long, flowy, rust-colored, brushing just above her ankle, where her legs are crossed. She's smiling, eyes alight.

The woman looks like every illustration from childhood of a fairy, but there's a sharpness to her, and a peculiar accessory for New York summer: black leather gloves, fingerless, with cutouts ribboned across her hands. Avant-garde, high fashion, maybe. Indy hopes she hasn't been standing still, staring, for long. She feels feverish, sweaty at the nape of her neck. The "I-want-to-know-everything" itch.

"Sit," the woman says.

Indy settles into the chair, crossing her legs to mirror her strange company.

The woman extends a gloved hand, fingers elegantly curling upward. "Take my hand."

Indy clasps it, hesitantly.

"What's your name?"

"Indy."

"Indy, I'm Archer," she says. "We're going to cycle through a few breaths together. You can close your eyes if you'd like. If not, that's fine."

Indy nods, sliding her eyes closed.

“In for four, hold for seven, out for eight,” Archer directs.

*Four, seven, eight.* They run the cycle through, over and over. Indy listens to their breath slowly match up, twin exhales, twin inhales. *Four, seven, eight. Four, seven, eight. Four, seven, eight.* The artist’s fingers pulse alongside hers. She feels her shoulders sink, her jaw unclench.

“Open your eyes.”

Indy blinks and squints past the blueish tint of the bright afternoon, smiling at the woman across the table. “That was nice.”

“I’m glad,” she says. “Thank you for sharing your time with me.”

“Thank *you*,” Indy says.

Archer clasps her hands together and bows, and Indy does the same. No tears, but she feels a sense of relief, grateful for any distraction. Grateful to be able to say *yes, I’ve been!* to the next pretentious person who asks about the exhibit, if she’s being honest. Archer gestures to a wooden door on the far side of the room: “right through there.”

Dazed, feeling as though she’s come up from underground, Indy tumbles through the door and finds herself in a gallery space. A few others are shuffling through, looking just as lightning-struck as her, wide-eyed and open-mouthed. She decides to plop herself on a bench, checking her watch again: thirty minutes. She genuinely does feel a little better, but she’s still left with a breathless wondering: *is everything going to be okay?*

As much as she stares harder and harder into this painting, it doesn’t give her any answers. The subjects are joyously unaware. In a half-joke, half-distraction effort, she’s grabbed one of the interactive-tour headphone sets from a hook beside the piece, but all it’s doing is adding to the mental clutter. She slides them off and loops them around her neck, letting out a bone-deep sigh.

It depicts the artist’s self-portrait, cut in two, juxtaposed on a mythical, ethereal backdrop: Archer on top, leaning over the edge of a pond, reaching down, fingers elegantly splayed. Below her, her reflection, identical in her longing expression, her skin a pale blue, reaching up, their fingers just barely brushing. She leans in to squint at the painting’s label—its title is *Talking to Myself Again*.

The inscription below is the typical, introspective fare, but a key phrase catches her eye: *Her elusive, exclusive artist’s commune*.

Her phone buzzes, interrupting her: a text that reads *where r u? there’s champagne and cookies!!!*

A second, immediately after: *Plz Indy people keep asking me where u are*

Building a career around getting lost has made her adept at running away-- and just as skilled at knowing when to surrender, to come back to reality. With more questions than answers, she leaves the soft cocoon of the gloved woman's artworks and sends a signal back: *I'm on my way.*

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It started with an apartment complex in Tokyo occupied by a man and his seventy-two wives: a fascinating story brought to her attention by a friend from college living in the same prefecture. She was just starting out at *Minute* (a fledgling media start-up then, and now, thanks to her, a multi-million dollar empire)-- a go getter, the dauntless rookie who would march into her boss's office with the packet of research unannounced. "I feel like cults are my calling," she said, and so they were, by some fluke, by the grace of a slow week. They cobbled together her tiny production team on an even tinier budget. *A hosting gig is a hosting gig*, she'd reassured her worried mother, the phone wedged between her head and her shoulder with the physical wince of paying for the plane ticket out-of-pocket, staring in disbelief at the confirmation email.

This job has taken her to nearly every continent since. The skyrocket to fame-- along with the almost embarrassingly large Netflix streaming deal-- came about eight months in, ushered in by a profile of a remote village in Norway. Its inhabitants elected to take a vow of silence so that, with time, they could become enlightened enough to eventually hear alien frequencies. An interesting month of interviews, conducted entirely in a Word document on an iPad passed between Indy and the villagers, spawned a charming, bizarre story that landed with millions of viewers.

As with everything in her career, being warned not to touch this season's story made her want to dig in deeper. Under the polished, well-organized surface of *The Kindred*, a new-age religion, lies a hotbed of scandal, celebrity influence, and massive wealth. Just the task for her. Over a year's worth of work, flying coast to coast on a weekly basis, carefully protecting defectors' identities, filming everything they could, given the red tape.

Think of every insidiously selfish politician, every smug actor with five or more houses and a history of on-set meltdowns, every Forbes CEO: a good portion of them belong to the upper echelon of the *Kindred*. Spread across the world on a series of remote island retreats and gazillion-bedroom homes, they hold a sway deeper than any established authority. Indy's year attempting to crack the surface of the *Kindred* led to a terrifying realization: everything, somehow, goes back to a member of the *Kindred* in one way or another.

She's a T.V. host, so she's not bound to any kind of niceties, but she can't help but think: the neatly addressed cease-and-desists they've sent her for weeks, the ones that Richard from Legal assured her not to worry about, feel laced with a messy undercurrent of a threat.

She steps into the raucous premiere party fifteen minutes late, cursing whoever dismissed her request of minimal fanfare. They've rented out a massive ballroom for the occasion, with glittering chandeliers and a towering projector screen.

She scans the room and finds a head of thick curls popping out from behind a production intern's head: Sybil. The bearer of late-night junk food deliveries, the literal shoulder to cry on, Indy's rock and roommate for the better part of her twenties. The no-nonsense, kick-ass showrunner for her series. Indy sidles up to her, gives her a friendly elbow to the side. Sybil's right eyebrow arches upward. "Hi," she starts, then: "Congrats." A pause. "What do you want?"

"An out," Indy says through her teeth, smiling at passersby.

"You just got here," she starts, then stops. By now, she knows arguing with Indy's neuroticism is futile. "Okay. I'll make an excuse to someone. I'm coming with you, whether you like it or not."

With the crowd beginning to notice Indy's presence, they get swallowed by more than a few sticky, chattery circles of people vying for her attention before they can leave. Indy indulges for a few minutes, gracious with praise, tight-lipped and impatient at the barrage of small talk. She makes a point to mute every channel of communication she can once the swarm around her dies down and they manage to slip out of a side door unnoticed. Stuffed in their purses, the latches bent and bursting, are an inordinate number of flowers, chocolates, cards, a few bottles of champagne to take home.

With time, Sibyl has learned how to slow Indy's million-mile-a-minute brain before it even leaves the station. Their Friday afternoon, bleeding into the night, is a circus of stereotypical self-care distractions: face masks, *Mamma Mia*, pizza, copious amounts of alcohol. A few congratulatory texts slither in through the noise. Sybil confiscates her phone after a certain point.

What she knows, based on the few things she's seen:

1. They're getting tons of hits.
2. Everyone loves it.
3. No word from the subjects, who will, inevitably, hate it.

Before she falls asleep, she cycles through the mysterious artist's breaths a few times over:  
*four, seven, eight. Four, seven, eight. Four, seven, eight.*



When Indy dreams, she finds herself at the edge of a pond, looking down at her reflection. The reflection tries to speak, but her voice is muffled, distant. She gesticulates wildly at her throat, fighting the weight of the water around her. Indy, on the surface, dives in to save herself, and the second she breaks the icy-cold surface, she wakes, soaked in sweat.

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All things considered, the next week is normal.

The following Friday, she leaves her office early, something she rarely does, feeling bold. A mundane endeavor: a dentist's appointment she's been putting off for over a year.

The *Shared Breath* exhibit has ended, but she finds herself chanting *four, seven, eight*, wearing it out in moments of anxiety. Secretly, she finds herself too hopeful that she'll see the woman with gloves again: a breathless gasp before entering every train car, every bar. The moment of anticipation before the subway doors open, the first glimpse of daylight emerging from underground, the breath before she rounds the corner: she looks for her in all of them, inexplicably.

It's a futuristic, modern, neon-lit beacon on the Upper East Side, with a sign that haughtily declares it a *dental studio*. The chipper eighteen-year-old tapping away on her iPad at the front desk informs her it will be an hour wait, so she slides into a bright-white, egg-shaped hanging chair and browses the selection of reading material tucked in the small shelf underneath. A shocking burst of crimson peeks out from underneath a *People* magazine, and she slides it out, hoping, wondering. There it is: the anticipatory gasp, warranted this time. The gloved woman stares back at her from a glossy hardcover. *Temporarily Suspend Disbelief: Essays on Life Imitating Art Imitating Life*, reads the title, emblazoned above her head of purposely-mussed waves. She's resting her hand in her gloved hands-- this pair is sheer, embroidered-- smiling with her eyes mischievous, alight, as if her gaze is directed at Indy, saying, *you caught me*.

The first chapter is titled "As Fate Would Have It"; Indy nods in agreement.

*To you*, the dedication page says. Indy snaps a picture of the cover before she gets sucked into the deep-dive.

*I was born in Fate, Texas*, the book begins, and Indy feels the dust swirl around her, the hot, humid air, the languid, syrupy way time flows in a small town.

Her writing is fresh and earnest, full of things to underline, funny and insightful all at once. There's a magnetic, compelling quality to it all. One review on the back reads "this book is a transmission from highly enlightened life."

"Ms. Kirkwood?" She doesn't even know how long she's been sitting, curled up tightly, leaning into the gentle sway of the chair.

"Hi, yes, that's me."

The dance of small talk begins, and mostly goes off without a hitch. She falls into the trance of a *Real Housewives* episode while they clean her teeth, nodding and giving polite answers to the hygienist's questions.

"Oh my *god*," a booming voice, which she assumes is the dentist's, tumbles into the room, and suddenly, there are no less than five faces standing over her, smiling. Her mouth is stretched wide open, and she does her best to smile back, awkwardly. "This is the girl who did the Kindred expose! As soon as I saw your name on our roster today, I got *so* excited. I've been making everyone I know watch it. She's like the *Planet Earth* of cults, this girl."

"Uh huh," Indy says around the mouth prop, followed by a garbled "thank you".

"Take that out of her mouth, would you, Bill?" A woman to her left says, and Indy gratefully sits up, shaking the hands of everyone around her.

"We're so sorry to ambush you," the same woman, who introduces herself as Dr. White, says. "We've all been obsessed with your show for *years*. You've really outdone yourself with this one. It's all anyone's been able to talk about around here!"

"My sister nearly fell in with those bastards," another woman pipes up, shaking her head. "I'm glad you showed the world who they really are."

Responding to the praise feels overwhelming—especially when her mouth still tastes like plastic and peppermint—but she does her best. "Thank you. I really appreciate it."

This goes on for longer than she'd hoped, fielding niceties and answering questions she doesn't quite have answers to.

"Let me walk you out," Dr. Rose—*call me Bill*—offers, and, seeing the book on the seat cushion, she turns to him.

"Bill," she starts. "Can I ask you a weird favor?"

"Anything for you."

"Can I borrow this?" She picks up the book, and Bill smiles.

“Oh, sure. My wife is obsessed with that woman,” he says. “Bought a sculpture for our garden and everything. She’s bought copies of that damn book for everyone we know.”

She thanks him, tucking the book into her bag. Through the doors and into the clatter of the city again, she spends the train ride home buried in Archer’s head. She spends the weekend there, sprawled across the living room couch, only pausing to answer congratulatory phone calls, relegating emails to her assistant.

Monday morning, she reads it at her desk instead of crafting her to-do list. “Artist commune??” she writes in bright-red ink on a bright-blue post-it, sticking it at the corner of her desktop.

Somewhere in the middle of her constant nerves-- March, maybe, the days have begun to run together—there’s a two-week period where she begins to breathe easier again, even with the radio silence from her unwilling subjects. Re-learning how to walk in the shoes of someone who, most of the time, considers herself untouchable. Remembering how to fall asleep. Remembering what it feels like to *function*.

Every few months, Indy will wade across the sea of cubicles and into the cool, dark den of the production office, where Sybil will knowingly look up from her computer in the sixth-sense way that she does. Indy names the place. Sybil asks *when?* *When* is usually tomorrow or the next day, and they’ll walk out of the office in tandem, sharing a knowing smile. Indy’s apartment becomes a flurry of clothes and vacuum-sealed bags into the early hours of the morning, and they’re off to the weird, true profession they live for.

Today is not one of those days, but Indy peeks her head into the production office anyway, hoping to pitch her latest idea to Sybil before she runs it by everyone else. “There’s my *dream team!*” Lucas, the Head of Digital, shouts on the way out as they cross paths. Indy feels Sybil’s eyes rolling before she watches it happen.

In-between the languid, lazy beats of figuring out their dinner plans, the receptionist, Andrew, flutters over, clearly out of breath. “Indy? Hey, uh, you got a weird message. Also, this letter came for you.”

Once again, that neat *K* letterhead in no-nonsense serif, staring back at her: in the middle of an expansive white space, she sees their response, loud and clear: *you were warned*.

Sybil scoffs. “Come *on*. Give me a break. *You were warned*,” she mocks, nasally. “What kind of third-grade-ass threat is that?”

Indy pockets it and decides denial will be the course of action, just for tonight.

After a long night out with Sybil-- one where she didn't look over her shoulder, not once, and just barely resisted the comfortable, worn grip of the pepper spray in her purse-- they arrive home, shoes in hand, squeezing into the doorframe shoulder-to-shoulder, knocky-kneed and giggly, to Indy's apartment torn to shreds. The pink velvet corner chair overturned and off-kilter, her fridge wide-open, the bedroom doorknob almost broken off completely.

She begins cleaning up, robotic, without a word, while Sybil calls the police: slotting things in their rightful places, a small reprieve of pretending things could be normal, even knowing, logically, she can never sleep there again.

Straightening her sheets, re-fluffing the pillows, she hears a distant knock on the door. Just before she goes to answer, she makes a discovery that will never cease to unsettle her: just next to where her head usually swims with sleepless thoughts, carved in the nightstand her grandfather had built with his bare hands, a long, ragged *K*, unmistakably for *Kindred*.

Indy, with her expertise in disappearing, takes this as a cue to retreat.

## 2

### TWO YEARS LATER

The drive upstate is lush with spring greenery and the slow fizz of the radio. Even in the nail-biting, hair-twirling anticipation, there's still an undercurrent of curiosity, excitement. The slim, purple binder in her backpack is filled to the brim with notes, photos, article clippings. Thumbing through it is a nervous tic at this point, it's almost all committed to memory-- but she does it anyway. All the same phrases greet her: *special abilities, gifted art student, Inner Work, community, sisterhood.*

There are endless reams of these research packets and otherworldly souvenirs in her desk drawers, even still. Forty pages on the Siberian Jesus. An entire stack of hardcover books from the Australian alien-doomsday seniors. A letter from the silent village thanking her for her cooperation and understanding. An incredibly unique collection, really, sitting beneath where she does her taxes and sips her morning coffee. A fringe-religion treasure chest from all her weird, wild journeys. All except from her most recent trip: those spoils have been shredded, burned, torn apart. Scrubbed clean in a paranoid, out-of-body frenzy.

It was, at first, the most sensational feedback she'd ever received from a piece. The Kindred, as she learned, had a unique grasp on Hollywood, and the upper echelon at large-- politics, sports, finance-- in ways that took a long, careful combing to unpack it all, and it showed. *Minute's* inboxes were flooding with praise. Strangers stopped her on the street, with a gentle touch to the arm or shoulder: *loved your show. Brilliant.*

Then, the strangers began to follow her with cameras. Letters upon letters of vitriol were sent to her work, all with the same letterhead: a menacing serif in stark black ink. The calls were so relentless at one point that she had to change her personal and work phone numbers twice in the span of two weeks. Even with taking immense precautions to ensure that *that*-- the era of her life she can't even give a name to, other than *That*, that horrible time where she couldn't sleep because she was harassed and stalked by angry followers of a polished, deceptive man who sold the lie of eternal life, if only you would take his workshops, read his manically-written books, spend your entire life's savings, endure his wrath in the name of a so-called "enlightenment"-- wouldn't happen, it did, in the worst, insidious way possible.

The kind of situation that would cause *anyone* to rip their desk to shreds, in short. The kind of situation that would cause anyone to take two years off from their life's work and stay at home, writing the mundane, doing anything to stay busy. It took installing three locks before she could feel remotely safe living by herself again. Endless hours of therapy. The gracious and tactful time of *Minute's* legal team. Many sleepless nights in which she swung back and forth between feeling sorry for a psychotic billionaire playboy turned shameless, money-hungry, celebrity cult leader, and cursing every last bit of his existence, his stupid children, his silent, elusive wife.

Ironically, that's her personal favorite standout word from this packet: *elusive*. A descriptor with gravity. The Hunt, this fresh-start endeavor, so elusive, in fact, that the last few miles of the trip are dictated by a set of handwritten instructions, copied from an email from the Prophet's assistant and Director of Logistics, Jess. *Hang a left at the elm tree. Up and over the hill, three miles past the vineyard. You can't miss it.*

Sybil, who has driven in relative silence for most of the way, lets out a startling, involuntary gasp once they cross over the hill in question, and the commune shifts into view. "Holy *wow*."

---

"I think I've forgotten how you're supposed to dress when you meet a cult leader."

Indy preens in the mirror like any other night out: the awkward dance of limbs, the 360-twirl, once, twice, three times. The smile, the smize. Scrubbing away the lipstick on her teeth. A tousle of the hair. Behind her, Sybil has established her own judge's table, cushioned by a tornado crafted of old formal dresses from college, a couple impulse-buy dresses with tags still on, a few swipes from other closets.

The gist: Indy knows she's rusty. This will be a dazzling feat.

As she continues to fluff herself, she remembers her own words from their very first profile, nearly five years ago, a community of elderly doomsday-preppers: "*As much of a spectacle we may consider these groups (cults, communes, new religious movements, whichever term you prefer) to be, they remind us of our humanity. We are all looking for a sense of belonging-- for these folks, belonging happens to be building tricked-out bunkers and writing books about alien sex.*"

Indy thinks she knows what she's in for until she sits down across from two girls on the subway with near-matching shirts, each adorned with a singular, colorful, unmistakable handprint. These are the hands of a prophet, or so they call her now.

While Indy was making herself smaller, Archer became a global phenomenon, a mystic myth, a bona-fide celebrity. Her healing hands-- an explanation for the gloves of yesteryear-- have spurred a lucrative art career, another book deal, and a cult following of admirers, both literally and figuratively. The t-shirts in question are from the Prophet's charity collaboration with some expensive sustainable brand-- 100% of the profits went to something about arts education, Indy recalls, a mostly irrelevant fact folded deep in her research packet. They're chatting in animated, enthusiastic chirps, jewelry twinkling in the light. "She's just so... resplendent," one says, the other answering with a deep *mmmbmmm*.

She's read Archer's memoir twice now: she's read through her whole shelf, really, twice, thrice over. The past year has been house arrest, in essence. She and Sybil both moved out of caution, necessity: Indy to a one-bedroom across the neighborhood, Sybil in with Vasco. As she watches them, she feels a twinge of bitterness: mourning her past, glittery self, who moved about the world with nothing to fear.

She's not surprised when the girls get off at the same stop as her, walking in sync. Their hips knock together, and they giggle as they shuffle into place, as if in some planned procession, to wait just outside of the circle of security guards near the entrance. The Prophet, of course, is popular amongst ladies of her kind: twentysomething creative types like Indy and her friends. There's a few others, too, *Goop*-types, draped in flowy, sheer garb, some clutching books hoping to be signed. Indy flashes her press pass and shuffles in with the crowd through a glass lobby and into the main gallery, where she's immediately given a glass of pink champagne. Resplendent, indeed.

A very uptown affair: an art gallery chock-full of angular faces and expensive suits. Indy's been tasked with establishing a point of contact, but she *has* to see the spectacle, if only a glimpse. The spectacle of a very specific, special pair of gloved hands.

The gallery, an uneasy kind of effortless modern, is hosting all sorts of oddities tonight, each handmade by the Prophet. Sculptures made of delicate, gossamer metal, some of them in motion, spinning in the early-evening golden haze coming from the skylight above. Most of the paintings are derived from testimonies of visitors to her private, insular "community"-- the Prophet's word, Indy recalls, from the various interview scraps stuck to her bulletin boards-- upstate. *A community of women committed to Inner Work and artistic expression*, reads the bare-bones, minimal-chic website. *Open to the public for day tours and sessions-- book now!* Then, beneath it, in extra-fine print: *lodging by invitation only*.

The hands are an easy find: the well-manicured nails fluttering about the main gallery are plum, black, wine, various shades of nude. The Prophet's are a striking cerulean, a glimmer of some

far-away stone. They're striking against the dove-gray color of her wrappings: not quite gloves, not quite gauze, but something that looks like feather-soft, gossamer silk, carefully bundled so as only to show off just her fingertips. The wrappings keep the hands shielded. The magic hands. The cure-all hands. The hands that hold the world up, according to various movie stars, athletes, New York It-girls, and the women who have been invited to stay at the community, aptly named The Hunt, after Artemis' band of unmarried warrior women.

Celebrities have touted visits to The Hunt like a weekend at a sweat lodge. "Great session with the Prophet herself," reads a caption on Gwyneth Paltrow's Instagram, accompanied by a photo of the two cuddled up in ethically-made athleisure on the Prophet's porch, beaming for the camera. "I feel like a new woman." Oprah, the Kardashians, models, musicians, actresses, every woman who's anyone, really-- make their pilgrimages multiple times a year. Beyoncé, even, in her effortlessly cool, minimalistic way, has sung her praises-- a picture of their unmistakable hands, clasped, with one word to caption: "Magic."

Archer takes the stage, minutes later-- she's warm, funny, surprisingly apologetic from the jump. "Thank you, everyone, for coming-- friends, family, Huntresses, members of the press. Strangers or not. I'm so lucky that I get to do what I love for a living, whatever, I won't go on for too long, but *abbbb!* Thank you for being here. Or at least pretending to be engaged while you drink free booze." An uproar of laughter. "Love and light to you all." She presses the magic hands to her lips and blows a kiss to the crowd.

She watches those cerulean nails so closely as they leave the stage that she doesn't see the beautiful face, the glossy mouth, beckoning her across the room just after.

Archer-- *the Prophet*-- is staring directly at Indy, clutching a glass of wine with one hand and making a come-hither motion with the other. Indy gulps, points her chipped, metallic-violet nail directly in the center of her chest. *Me?* she mouths.

*Yeah, you,* the Prophet mouths back. She's smiling and waving her over as though Indy is an old friend, like she's about to pull her into a conversation where she says *oh, Indy, we were just talking about you!* Throwing her head back in effortless, effervescent laughter. They *are* old friends, Indy supposes, in a roundabout way. The Indy of Now is a world of difference from the Indy of Then.

"Old friend," Archer greets her, funnily enough, taking both of Indy's hands in her own. The tulle is soft to the touch, her fingers warm and pulsing with energy, excitement. Indy examines the intricate rings adorning her fingers, reflecting light through the tulle, ones she's only seen on a magazine cover or two, a promotional photo, the very few personal photos the Prophet shares on



Instagram. They're gold and geometric, with a few precious stones. Coiled around her ring finger is the mark of the Hunt: a gold ring that curls up from the base of her finger to the top knuckle, with delicate hinges, in the shape of an arrow. "It's been a while."

A small crowd has already gathered in wonder, flies to honey. The whispers are deafening: *she's touching her!* Someone, an aide, perhaps, has taken her champagne glass. Before Indy can respond properly, Archer is introducing her to the circle surrounding them-- *my dear friend Indy Kirkwood*, she says, still holding on to one hand. Indy tries not to be nauseous at the nakedness of knowing they could know *exactly* who she is, based on the news stories of the loneliest, most horrifying time of her life.

The Prophet then lets go of her hands to motion to her all-female security detail. "Can one of you get my purse, please?" she calls. A tall, muscular woman with a buzzcut in the corner nods, exits briefly into the next room, and returns with a black circular clutch with a single gold clasp. "I know you're drawn to..." The Prophet ponders; Indy wonders if she's looking for a word that isn't *cults*. "Places... that are... out of the ordinary, obviously. You want answers," the Prophet says, just above a whisper. "That's why you came here tonight, right?"

"Right," Indy says. "If you're willing, of course. I just figured..." Archer holds up a quieting finger, smiling. She rummages through her purse, and Indy marvels at how the simple action is so human-- how endearingly down-to-earth, and yet so otherworldly, she still manages to be.

Archer has famously never done interviews, not really. At least not like anything Indy has done-- a fully immersive stay, a tell-all, a lengthy vetting process. In short: the perfect comeback.

She pulls a pen and a crisp note card from her purse, scribbles down a number, and folds it into Indy's right hand. "I wouldn't want anyone else to do it but you. I want you to come stay with us. There's my assistant's number. We'll work something out, very, very soon."

"Wow," Indy says, slipping the card in her pocket. "Thank you."

"No, thank *you*," the Prophet says. "I'll be seeing you soon, hopefully. Have a great rest of your night." She squeezes Indy's hands and slides away, flanked by two security guards.

Indy lingers for a while longer, fielding questions from complete strangers about the interaction. Once the staring subsides, she wanders the room, finding a small stand stocked with hand-prints, like the t-shirts she'd seen on the subway. She buys the one that stands out most-- a rich eggplant purple, marbled with a metallic gold. The girl behind the iPad wraps it in soft, gossamer protective paper, smiling as she deliberately runs her finger along each crease. "Here you go." When she passes the print across the table, she makes a ceremonial deal of it, extending both

her hands to Indy. May this bring the Prophet's divine light and teachings into your home, or wherever you choose to hang it."

"Divine light, huh?" Indy murmurs. It's a familiar buzzword, but with a distinct undercurrent of something more mystical than her previous subjects. "Hmm. Sounds nice."

When she resurfaces from the cool, still air of the gallery, she instantly starts fanning herself: the humidity is overwhelming.

"Call Sybil," she murmurs into her phone, huddling underneath an awning to avoid the airy summer drizzle.

*Calling Sybil Johnson*, it chirps.

"What happened? It's been less than an hour. Are you okay?"

"Well," she says, rubbing the notecard between her thumb and forefinger in her right pocket. "The Sparknotes: I walked in, got a glass of champagne, and she called me over, gave me her assistant's number, and said *she knew I wanted answers*. Then I bought some art, and now I'm waiting for a Lyft to you."

"So... better than expected?"

"I guess so?"

"I'm proud of you. I mean it."

The Lyft driver pulls up across the street; Indy hangs up with a mused-together *okaythelyftishereloveyoubye*. Once she steps out into the rain, she winces at the inevitable: the painting, tucked under her arm, is undoubtedly soaked. There's a whole mess of uncovered steps she has to go through once dropped off by Sybil and Vasco's apartment, and the dress, her shoes, her makeup, her *life*, is drenched completely through.

Once she's invited in, given clothes to change into, they lament the papery, pulpy mess left by the painting on the table.

"Let's see the damage," Sybil says, tearing apart the layers with a gentle care, even as they dissolve in her hands.

The painting is bone dry.

The glance they give each other says everything without saying anything: a glimmer of curiosity, the "I-want-to-know-everything" itch. It's been a while since they've had an otherworldly good sign.

"So," Indy starts, letting a smile pull the corner of her mouth upward. "When are we going?"

It's a massive field, as far as the eye can see, mostly open, but circled in by a waist-high wall made of smooth, gray stones, stacked on top of one another. The houses—about a hundred, according to Indy's research-- are brightly colored monoliths, harmonious pastels with huge windows and richly flourishing gardens. As if the houses that lined the Gulf Coast when she visited as a child, standing proudly in every hue of the rainbow, somehow grew legs and took a weekend away here, in a cooler, more remote setting. Between the houses are winding stone paths, lined with exotic flowers she's never seen before. In the distance, at what appears to be the far end of the commune, lies a large, white building, with humongous glass windows-- the rec center, neighbored by the dining hall. It should be chaos, but somehow, it's ethereal, harmonious, blissful, welcoming. Wordlessly, they unload the trunk, filled with camera equipment and laptops and overnight bags. They'll be staying for nearly a week, although Indy expects-- *hopes*, secretly, mesmerized by the shock of color and light-- they'll be having to return once or twice more for a full-bodied narrative.

They share a look of bewildered, child-like awe. A glimpse of the Sybil and Indy of old, before the catastrophic *That*. A favorite party-trick is pulling out the story of the first time they did this, in Tokyo, eyes bleary from jet lag. A raucous, windy tale of how they looked like pack mules running through the airport to catch their connecting flight, of phrases lost in translation.

"How did they get the permits for all of this?" Sybil asks, incredulous.

"That's the first question you ask?" Indy retorts, transfixed. Now that they're close-up, she can clearly see clusters of young women around her age, some slightly younger or older, in colorful dresses, wide-leg pants, bold lipsticks, patterned hijabs, chunky glasses, flitting amongst the houses, sitting on porch swings. It's all shrieking laughter and animated conversation. *Sisterhood*. She feels a strong urge to hastily unpack the camera equipment and take a shot here: the strange, idyllic comfort of this first impression, this postcard-perfect window.

Her pocket is buzzing-- she answers the call to discover one of the crew vans is lost, predictably. Service is cutting in and out, six bickering voices on the other end distorting into incomprehensible shouts. She doesn't want to miss a second of this first impression, the initial sketching that colors these far-flung, free-spirited pockets of the world in her mind. This place is so unlike everywhere else they've been-- there's a tangible, breathable hum of excitement in the air, something that feels just south of reality. Wordlessly, she hands the phone to Sybil, who wedges it between her neck and shoulder as she unpacks camera equipment from the backseat.

As always, Sybil's ability to balance twenty heavy things and bark orders without losing her breath is, without fail, one of the best things about her. "Oh my god, Jared, how did you end up in a field? Get back to the road. Turn around. There's like, a little notch in the fence you can follow-- you don't see a fence? Oh, Jesus *Christ*, did you even read the instructions I emailed? Can you even read at all? I doubt it. Sincerely."

Then, from the fray, like a mirage, Archer emerges.

Over the years, the thing that Indy, even still, finds most fascinating, is the way her subjects' followers react to their presence. Sometimes, there's been a silent reverence; others-- most, really-- elicit a frantic fervor, always drawing a crowd, a cloud of overeager praise. Usually, she tries to steady her expression, no matter how much she wants to roll her eyes, or delight in the spectacle: she's there to observe. They've parked among the other cars there, as instructed, so it seems no one has noticed them yet. A rare moment of stealth, of uninterrupted obscurity: Indy delights in this.

There's a murmur of activity as she moves through the crowd and greets everyone, squeezing hands as she passes by, twirling the hem of her dress when she's loudly complimented from someone's porch. It's relatively typical fare: no one has fallen on their knees yet, although, she notes, they all greet her as "Prophet", which carries its own unique breed of bizarre.

In the front yard of a white house with a deep eggplant-colored door, a crowd of women are playing a pick-up game of soccer. From Indy's research, she knows there are all sorts of impressive people who have chosen to make their home here-- Olympians, humanitarians, sociologists, scientists. She wouldn't be surprised if these women were professionals: they move with an impressive agility, sweaty and volleying teasing words back and forth, chasing towards a makeshift goal.

The true pulse-check of a cult leader, she's found, is the reaction they have to their followers in turn. This usually sets the tone for the interviews to follow: will they be condescending? Dismissive? Full of themselves? (Usually, somewhere in the gray area: the kindest ones, she finds, typically haven't been those with the power.)

Indy watches as Archer unlaces her boots-- black, embossed with abstract gold leaf, no doubt designer-- and casts them to the side of the cobblestone path, running, shameless, into the fray of the soccer game. She quickly gets a hold of the ball, careful to lift the long skirt of her dress, so as not to trip. Taking off towards the goal, she fends off the two women who move beside her, a tangle of elbows and trash talk.

"Whose team are you on, Prophet?" One says.

“Whichever one is winning!” She cackles, finally outrunning the other women by just a few scant inches, sinking the ball into the goal with a satisfying *ting*. She's laughing so hard she collapses into the goalie, a purple-haired, lanky woman, who affectionately slaps her on the back.

Leaning against the car, ignoring the bite of equipment-bag straps digging into her arms, Indy finds herself, for once, breathless. Never in her years of experience has she seen a subject like this: eager to walk beside their followers, demanding no attention and simultaneously becoming the center of it. Sybil, too, has stopped to watch, sitting in the trunk, letting her legs sway with inattentive ease.

At that moment, the two crew vans pull up at once, blasting bass-heavy music, turning heads across the grounds. The illusion is broken. Indy scowls and, without looking, feels Sybil's face contort in turn.

"Remind me to kill Jared when we leave," Sybil grumbles, steadying herself on land, slamming the trunk closed. "Or fire him. Or both."

You really mean it this time?" Indy replies. She hears Sybil's snarky defense at a distant hum, like the din of a neighbor's TV, because now Archer has noticed her, waving with a delicate, gloved hand, the glint of her rings capturing the sun.

Archer begins to make her way over to the gravel lot to greet them, pulling her shoes back on as she walks, surprisingly graceful, even while teeter-tottering on a socked foot. The women return to their game and the chorus of conversations continues. There are a few sporadic onlookers who smile politely in the direction of the vans, then resume. Being greeted by the subject herself is a rare treat: no right-hand woman, no PR theatrics. Usually, it looks like being ushered past locked doors into private quarters, only catching a glimpse of what she really wants.

There's a strange newness that flits between Indy and her subjects, always. *They're just a person*, she likes to repeat to herself, a worn mantra that rarely works to soothe. Even though she's met Archer before, she can't help but think of her first interview, years ago. Sometimes, still, she'll return to that tape, for a moment left out of the transcription.

The room was bright in a way that was almost sterile, unwelcoming, artificial. Pearly-white walls, very little furniture—immaculately sewn cushions strewn on the floor, a long, dark-wood coffee table. At one end, Indy and a very patient cameraman; at the other, her subject: the old man with seventy-two wives, and a very patient translator. It's etched so vividly in memory, even still: the shadow of the blinds on his face, cross-hatching his soft, worn wrinkles. The reverent silence. The patch of her arm in direct sunlight that turned salmon-pink with sunburn.

She doesn't quite remember the first question out of the gate, but she does recall the crimson-hot embarrassment of stuttering through it, her words running together, spilling over. The translator, no older than her, a local journalist, a friend-of-a-friend the office set her up with, starting his sentence, then turning back to her.

His gracious offering: "wanna take a deep breath and start over?"

The grateful reply: "god, yes."

Indy takes a spacious breath and walks in tandem with Sybil, who, at the last second, with her patented *get-out-of-my-way* walk, beats her to Archer. Indy wouldn't want to be on the other side of her firm handshake, but Archer accepts it with a smile. "Sybil," she coos, making her name sound shiny-new. Indy catches the imperceptible, skeptical smirk in return. They exchange pleasantries for a moment, while Indy prepares herself: *deep breath. Deep breath. She's just a person. She's just a person.*

It's silly, Indy thinks, how she moves on two different planes. To the outside, she's Indy Kirkwood, the world traveler, the docuseries wunderkind, the darling of every major publication, "the Bourdain of cults", as one affectionate review called her, always going, going, going. To herself, to her inner circle, she's Indy: a skeptic with a soft heart, a nervous wreck, a lover of solitude. In this moment, facing Archer, facing her first project in years, she feels like she's been turned inside-out.

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From this side of the multi-million-dollar, impossibly modern rec center, the fully-glass walls showcase the glimmers of sunlight on the indoor pool water. A lone swimmer slices through the water; above her, a few pairs of women are running laps on an indoor track, all long legs and chic, coordinating two-pieces. Archer tells them they'll circle back here later, closer to dinnertime. They're led along the path that winds between the houses, guided by faint windchimes, the gentle, swaying breeze of the monstera leaves.

No one lives here completely full-time, save for the Council, Archer explains. Indy's done light research on them, too: all of Archer's best friends from high school and college, the movers and shakers of the community. "Think of it like a coworking space, but instead of work, it's self-improvement," she says. "Self-actualization."

People who *can* work from home—writers, CEOs, and the like, stay here for most of the year, but everyone itches for a little bit of the city every once in a while. Archer herself has to go back and forth for events, art shows, the occasional shopping trip. There's a farm down the road that provides their fresh produce; everything else is shipped up from the city. Everything that moves

is clean-energy, sustainable, ethical. Interspersed throughout the grounds are tiny, quiet zen gardens, with stone benches, giant hammocks, and softly bubbling fountains.

Even with dozens of trips under her belt, Indy can say this is nothing like the ramshackle, close-quarters hodgepodge of cults past. In every instance, it's felt like previous subjects fled last-minute with only the clothes on their backs, always breathlessly out of place. This, without a doubt, was planned with utmost precision. Even the crew, raucous as they are, are nodding along with Archer's commentary, taking it all in.

The silent reverence continues for the rest of their tour, as Archer points out the accolades of the houses around them. *Author. Doctor. Lawyer. Humanitarian slash model. Activist.* "They're so much more than their professions, of course," Archer tacks on at the end. "It just gives you a quick little window into their brilliance." They were recruited, hand-picked, from around the world, from Archer's travels as an artist and healer. "I love to collect interesting people," she says over her shoulder.

"How many years did this take to build?" Indy asks, running her hand along a wooden railing.

"All together? About five years. I wanted every single detail to be perfect. But we're always expanding, even in little ways. It's our sanctuary. As we grow, our space grows, too."

"An oasis," Sybil quips, bending down to admire the koi pond.

"Exactly." Archer is beaming. "Come, come. I have to show you the creative space. Best for last before dinner."

For a moment, Indy breathes in the fresh air, letting herself lag behind the group. She has come to love the pockets of stillness she finds in the oddest of places. If there's one thing she can connect with her subjects on, it's the thrill of being off-the-grid, a chance to carve out a uniquely sacred place in the world. A slice of the spiritual. When she was younger, she'd always been one to crave noise, after growing up in a quiet, flat suburb. A classic case of Midwest malaise. She remembers staying up for nights on end when she first moved to the city, not from a place of annoyance, but because she delighted in the constant commotion: peering out her dorm room window, wanting to know more. This career has taught her to relish in the silence again. Even if she's halfway around the world, she can close her eyes and find a moment of reprieve.

She opens her eyes and joins the rest of the group.

The creative space is a house not unlike the others, painted in a seafoam green. Stained glass windows shimmer in the afternoon glow. It's all sleek, modern, glass desks and towering easels, walled-off conference rooms, gorgeous writing desks.

The crew has dispersed themselves among the far-flung corners of the house, scoping out the perfect spots for B-roll footage. This leaves Indy and Archer nearly alone, poring over the half-finished projects strewn about.

Her subjects are normally a lot older—Archer is her youngest subject thus far. They're around the same age. It's easy to distance yourself from the subject, she thinks, when *you* are not the subject. Often, it's a group of older folks, left over from a bygone era of counterculture. In these women, these faces, these books, she sees herself, which is perhaps the most terrifying reality she's faced yet. (She thinks this, even having sat toe-to-toe with murderers.)

"Are you okay? You've barely said anything since you got here," Archer says, apropos of nothing, once Sybil has flitted over to another corner of downstairs, leaving the two of them alone, standing in front of a surrealist oil painting in hues of green.

*What, we take deep breaths together for five minutes and suddenly you know me?* Indy wants to say. "No, I'm fine," she ultimately replies, her voice cracking. Archer, with her piercing gaze, her mystic empathy, her magnetic force, shoots her a look that says *say more. Deep breath, Indy.* "Oh, god, okay. Look. On a human-to-human, off-the-record level, I'm *extremely* nervous. I mean, it's been years. You saw everything that happened to me. The whole media circus."

Archer nods, a long, slow, contemplative act. She looks around the room before leaning in closer. "I'm nervous, too, if it helps," she whispers. "You make me nervous."

"I do?"

"Oh, come on. We don't let just *anyone* come here. I don't let people interview me for a reason, Indy. I knew you would get it."

She's normally only exposed to the magnetism of elusive leaders in small doses, so it's hard to know if she's being manipulated or just talked to like a *person* for once. Judging by Archer's earnest gaze, her gentle tone, she hopes it's the latter.

"Thank you."

"No, really. It's going to be great." Archer runs an affectionate hand along her shoulder.



“Just let me do my job,” Indy says, trying, and failing, to conceal her grin.

“Everyone ready for dinner?” Archer calls to the group.

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They’re seated in the dining hall around a wide, round table, drinking white wine and indulging in a peach caprese salad with toasted garlic naan. It’s all decadent and fresh and exploding with flavor. A team of ten of the best female chefs in the world rotate in and out of here throughout the year, paid handsomely. Indy thinks she forgot how to be objective three delicious appetizers ago.

The women seated around them are an enthusiastic bunch, talking with their hands and elbows in full force, exploding with laughter and warmth. Indy is particularly drawn to two sister musicians from Senegal on her left, Binta and Arida; Sybil cracks jokes with a sociological researcher, Vivi, on her right. Archer sits between the two of them, making sure everything is going smoothly, offering more wine, more bread, flitting back and forth between the chatter and the kitchen. Conversation has shifted from a serious debate on political theory to gossiping about pretentious, misogynistic college professors, swapping horror stories and shrieking with laughter and disgust. Everyone joyfully interjects and spars with one another, Indy notices, except for when Archer chimes in. Eyes collectively widen, and everything, even her smallest exclamations of “yes!” are met with nods, a chorus of “*mmmmmbmm*”s and “*yes, speak it!*”s.

“So—all of you are unmarried, right?” Sybil asks.

“Yes,” One chirps across the table. “It’s a sign of commitment to the Inner Work rather than a partner. A commitment to the Prophet.”

“It’s a commitment of all of us to *each other*, more than anything,” Archer adds, clearing her throat.

“We all have rings,” Vivi adds, bringing hers up to the light: a simple, gold-plated jade stone, wrapped around her left middle finger. “Picked up from Prophet’s world travels.”

“Frida Kahlo had this thing about rings,” Archer continues where Vivi left off. “She would wear a ton at a time and give them away to people. I loved that idea so much, I kind of stole it. I give it to new people once they’re ready to fully commit. Every single one has a story. I picked up that jade one from a tattoo parlor in Hong Kong, weirdly enough.” She laughs to herself, fiddling with her gloves. “It’s silly, I know, but it’s very *us*. We’re all committed to a higher purpose together.”

“There’s a ceremony and everything. In fact, there’s one coming up later this week.”

“It should be on the schedule Tess gave you,” Archer says.

There’s always this moment, the shift in reality, when the line is drawn between *us* (the crew) and *them*. When they become a subject to be studied.

Indy doesn’t know what to make of this: she’s enjoying herself a little too much. As the conversation ebbs and flows, she makes periodical eye contact with Sybil. They speak in that way they can do with the rise of an eyebrow, a tug in a corner of the mouth, volleying the same sentiment back and forth: *wow*.

It’s nearly ten when they finally start winding down. Between the two of them, the journalists have invitations to stay sometime in the future from nearly every single woman at the table. Indy has three women’s numbers on her napkin—she never knows how to say a polite, firm no to these things, especially now, with all of these women around her age-- one promises a spin class in the city, two for a wine night.

The plates are taken back to the kitchen and scraped into the compost bin before Archer returns to her seat and slides her hand over Indy’s. There’s a bit of a buzz there-- Indy’s fingers feel as though they’ve been set alight. Everyone at the table is staring, and she can feel it. “I’ll see you tomorrow at noon?” Indy nods, and Archer wishes the rest of the table goodnight.

Once Archer is out of earshot, Indy turns to the girls. “Binta,” she whispers.

“Hmm?”

“Why was everyone weird about her touching me?”

“Well,” Binta ponders. “Ladies,” she addresses the group in a louder voice, much to Indy’s dismay. “How would you answer this question?”

“What question?” Vivi asks.

“No, it’s not a big deal,” Indy starts.

“She was wondering why we all reacted so visibly when Prophet touched her.” Binta rolls her eyes, fondly, smacks Indy on the arm. “You are here to ask us questions, no? Don’t be shy.”

“It’s been a while,” Indy adds, wondering if they genuinely don’t know about her very public ordeal, or if they’re choosing not to speak about it. This is the deal when meeting new people nowadays: *have you seen my face on television confronting my stalkers in court, or are you just being nice?*

“Well,” Vivi starts. “To the best of my data-driven beliefs, whenever she touches someone, she... gets that *energy*. Whatever it is that goes on in those hands of hers. So, we, collectively, have

noticed that she isn't touchy-feely with you unless you're really, really close to her. It's, like, a *biig* deal if she touches someone."

"We're probably the wrong people to ask," Sonja says. "We've all been here less than a year. We're the newbies." She directs Indy's gaze to a table in the far-left corner, where Archer is chatting animatedly, a long, drawn-out goodbye, standing half-outside, half-inside. "They're the Council. They helped her start this whole thing. They're in charge, technically, but there's not really any rules. They're kind of just here to facilitate and teach."

"Bree-- the one in the leggings, yeah? -- teaches sunrise yoga on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday," Binta says. "You should come with me Wednesday. They have extra mats. I'll let you sleep in tomorrow."

"You know what? I will." There it is again: the thrill of immersion. Out of respect, Indy will usually follow along with the guidelines of any particular group, clothing herself in uniform, taking on a vow of silence, engaging in ritual. It's a viral moment her viewers love: the fourth-wall-breaking, *what-am-I-doing?* look into the camera.

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They finally pull themselves away from the group and decide to take a walk: Sybil's idea. "That's always the kicker, isn't it? What they do at night," she whispers. "Honestly, though, I *love* them. If someone's sacrificing an animal or something, I might just pretend I never saw it."

"Shut *up*," Indy retorts. "Remember when the sun worshippers roped you into that weird mud bath? You were there for hours."

"I said it then, and I'll say it again: who am I to turn down something so luxurious?"

As they circle the grounds, passing by the houses they'd explored in the daytime, they're both amazed at how warm and light and twinkly everything is, how the porch lights flicker, how the glow of TVs and the sounds of speakers playing soft, folksy music feel comforting and right.

They're stopped by a few friendly passers-by, who all seem relatively tame. They decide, eventually, when the wind takes a sudden nosedive into a sharp, unforgiving cold, to head to bed early.

"Do you think it's too good to be true?" Sybil mumbles around her toothbrush.

"Of course it is," Indy says, scrubbing her makeup off. "Everyone is too pretty and nice and smart. There has to be *something* going on."

“But what if there isn’t this time?”

“There is, dude. There *always* is.” She pulls her hair into a topknot and turns off the mirror light. “Goodnight.”

There were weeks when Indy couldn’t sleep for days on end-- months, really. Her closest grasp was a brief thirty-minute reprieve where her eyes would slide shut from exhaustion, only to jolt open shortly after. Freezing at the slightest jiggle of a doorknob down the hall, the slightest creak of the wooden floor. Even after the day they’ve had, her instinct still wants to press.

She pulls the covers up to her chin, reveling in the rural, starry quiet. Here, despite everything, she falls into a dreamless, blissful sleep.

### 3

Indy wakes just after 9, greeted by the sunlight poking its way through the curtains. She untangles herself from the cocoon of the duvet, wiping the remnants of a dreamless, but comfortable, sleep from her eyes. The long, crackly stretch, the cool wooden floor beneath her feet, the gentle breeze shaking the vines by her window: it feels like a new beginning. A familiar excitement settles into her shoulders. Interview day. Something akin to first-day-of-school jitters.

At exactly noon, Indy, with crew in tow, knocks on Archer's door. She answers immediately, cloaked in the signature purple, with gloves to match. "Hey. Right on time!" She shoos them in, offering coffee, cracking her knuckles. She's walking in circles around her kitchen island, rotating jars into place, brushing crumbs off the counter.

Its layout is similar to the guest house, infused with Archer's distinct character: a bright blue couch, a triptych of Frida Kahlo paintings, which she suspects are real. Chartreuse walls lined with photographs of Archer grinning alongside the women she presumes to be the Council. All sorts of art that should be mismatched, chaotic, but is somehow harmonious.

They decide on setting up in her studio, which is a sun-filled, high-ceilinged attachment to the back of the house; in the final staging, they sit facing each other in lavender papasan chairs, beneath a painting by Archer herself. Two women laying by a river, smiling with teeth, arms above their heads, vintage swimsuits, armpit hair wild.

"How's your day been?" Indy asks, as they're being fitted for mics. This is the first time they're really getting to speak today—the morning has been a flurry of logistics, mostly between Sybil, Tess, and the crew, with Indy and Archer hovering around the sidelines, chiming in when necessary.

Archer laughs. "Well, I woke up at 6 a.m. Watched the sun rise. Obsessively cleaned my house. Basically destroyed my closet figuring out what to wear. Now I'm here."

"The mornings are really beautiful here," Indy says. "I slept like a baby."

"I'm glad to hear it."

"I love this painting. Does it have a name?"

Most of her paintings are portraiture like this; residents of the commune, herself, other women in her life. Her sculptures are wild, twinkly, abstract. One of the rare interviews Indy could find, a photo story folded in the glossy pages of an arts magazine, depicts Archer in forest-green

coveralls and matching gloves, covered in sweat and dust, triumphantly standing above a gold, gossamer explosion of a sculpture, hands on her hips, hair wild. She's been fixated on this picture since she found it—it's so *opposite* of everything Archer presents to the world: poised, pristine, mysterious. It's everything she hopes to uncover and more.

"Everyone ready?" Jared, the director, is rolling up his sleeves as he paces, snapping the room to attention. Everyone affirms.

Archer leans in during the countdown, whispers: "it's called *live a little*."

#### UNEDITED TRANSCRIPT

Indy: Historically, you haven't really done interviews, and when you have, they've been brief. Why now? Why me?

Archer: Because I knew you would understand. [pause] I knew that, as a young woman, who is... not only successful in her field, but a thoughtful, intelligent person, who covers what she covers, you would completely get what we're doing here.

I: Thank you. I'm glad to hear that. When did this all start?

A: I had a mentor in art school who really shaped me and helped me start this whole thing. Tess Hudson. She was a TA in one of my art history classes at the time, but she's gone on to be this fantastic gallery owner and entrepreneur and art scholar and overall badass, and now she makes things run around here. She's my official-unofficial Co-Founder. I trust her with my life. We've always had a very special bond.

I: What about your abilities? What was the inciting incident for that?

A: Oh, geez. It was this old boyfriend I had in high school. Freshman year. Puppy love, you know. He used to get chills when he held my hand. Just, full-body, teeth-chattering chills. But, before then, probably around twelve or thirteen, I started to see flashes of things whenever I

touched people. Memories that most definitely didn't belong to me. To be honest, I never had a good relationship with my parents. They were good people, but very distant. So I don't know when the onset of it could have been. I was very independent and touch-starved for a long time. Basically raised by my Grandmother. The art was a big thing too. I knew I was good in a technical sense, but when people would touch my work, or admire it at a school art show or whatever, there would be such a visceral reaction. My Ceramics teacher in middle school wept while holding this really elaborate, decorative bowl I made once. She said she didn't understand why, but it had moved her so deeply.

I: So, you go to art school, you find your niche. Where did it evolve into wanting to build a community?

A: I think that it was all about community, being in school. We had a small class, and I had a really close, solid group of friends; most of them are on the Council, still, some support the community in other ways because they got married and moved back to the city or wherever else.

I: Did your friends know about your abilities then?

A: Well. That was the point in my life where I started covering my hands like this. I don't like to expose my bare hands to people because it feels like I'm accessing their thoughts without their consent. It's not mind-reading, it's just-- total, unfettered access. Radical empathy, I guess. I've never been able to put a name to it. The gloves became my signature accessory. Then, I told Tess about it. She sort of discovered it on accident. I got caught up one day and forgot to cover up, which led to her being exposed to it, which led to a million questions. But god, it was so freeing. She was the one who really encouraged me to lean into that potential and use it for good. How could this radical empathy help me and my friends, who were all these amazing, powerful, women, unlock our truest selves? It was then that we started wondering, what would it look like if we set this all up? What if we really got in touch with nature? Like a co-working space, but co-living. Our own rules. Our own space to claim as

ours. A place where we could really dig into each other and lean into this self-discovery.

I: How long did that take? Planning to execution?

A: Oh, god. Years. We've been around for almost four years now, but it took two years of planning and permits and budgeting for this to happen. As soon as we graduated, we got to work out here making this thing happen.

I: How did you guys fund this, being broke college graduates?

A: Well, right when I graduated was when I had my first solo exhibition. I poured every cent of that into this. We courted a lot of wealthy, older women who wanted to see this thing happen. Nowadays, for upkeep, everybody pitches in, but I don't like to exclude people I invite here based on their financial situation. We have plenty of money from the merchandise and the book sales and gals who have gone on to get married who still support the community financially to keep everyone afloat.

I: What's your criteria for inviting someone here?

A: Well, most of these women are women I've admired for a long time, in business, in literary circles, in the restaurant business, what have you. If I'm interested in inviting someone to live here, I'll usually send them a formal invite for a session, free of charge. We'll talk for awhile about how the Hunt can help them achieve their goals. How fluid and beautiful and freeing living here can be.

I: Has anyone said no?

A: Just a couple, but they were nice nos. Women who were planning on getting married soon. No one has really been super skeptical, which is good. I have a very thorough vetting process before I even consider inviting someone here. It's a very community-based process. The Council has recommended certain people here, too.



I: What would you say to the skeptics, which-- as you know, are all over the Internet.

A: Oh, yeah. And look, I think if someone told me they had magic hands, I'd ask what drugs they were on. [laughs] So, skeptics, I understand you. I get you. There are plenty of former skeptics who have come here and done a session with me just to see if it's all smoke and mirrors. It's not. You can't fake the knowledge I have. I think if you don't believe that someone could possess this ability, you're just being close-minded. People have had all sorts of sixth senses over the course of history. It's a well-documented phenomenon. This is mine.

I: What exactly is it that you do in your sessions? People have raved about them, and, like you said, those people come from all over the world to see you. How hard is it to get an appointment with you?

A: Depends on the time of year. Sometimes I'll block out weeks where I don't do any-- like this week, while you're here, for example, or if it's a holiday. Sometimes, if I'm in a really bad mental space, I'll close appointments for a bit. I can't be receptive to other people if I myself am not open and loving and at my best. And that's okay! Bad days are all part of the Inner Work. Mostly everyone who lives here gets sessions done at least once a month. A lot of those celebrities I've taken pictures with come back for routine sessions. I get all sorts of people of all ages. I don't think it's too hard to get an appointment with me. The longest anyone would have to wait for an appointment is maybe a month or two.

I: So, again, what exactly is it that you do? How would you define the Inner Work?

A: Think of it like therapy. We both sign confidentiality agreements. Nothing comes out of that room but pure relief, release, and rebirth.

I: You do get how sketchy that sounds, right?

A: I know. I know. People have tried to make all sorts of wild accusations, like I'm molesting people or I'm possessed by demons or whatever else wild conspiracies are out there on the deep depths of the internet. That's fine. I think it's hilarious. We are always quick to criticize and gawk at what we don't understand yet. It's a natural human tendency. I just hope that these people can find some method of understanding and self-love in their lives, even if they think the way *I'm* packaging it is a load of baloney.

A: Are you a skeptic, Indy?

I: That's my whole brand.

[laughter]

A: Well, *yeah*, I guess I mean— what specifically has you skeptical about *me*?

I: I think *skeptic* is maybe a negative word to use. Let's say I'm *curious* instead. I'm *curious* about what you're doing here. It's very different from what I've seen before, which I always say, but it's very true in this situation. I believe what you're saying, and I don't doubt that you have the abilities you have, really. I mean that. The secrecy just eludes me. Why be so transparent about everything except this?

A: I think I like to keep it secretive because I don't want it to be like, a gimmick. You know?

Archer launches into a ramble about how her art is her spirituality, and vice versa. “When I work in here, I feel like I become one with my materials,” she says. “I do a lot of portraiture, handprints. Scenes from my dreams. Sculpture is really where I get to play. I become more myself as I create things outside myself.” Then, her face suddenly sours. She crosses her arms, surveys Indy. “Indy, I feel like we're not really living into the potential of this conversation.”

Indy's taken aback. She raises an eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

“Well, the reason why we’re able to speak and create so freely here is because we’ve put everything in the open through our spiritual connections. I’ve been trying to put a finger on what’s been making me so anxious today, and I decided that it doesn’t feel right for you and I to sit here with each other without opening up that channel of communication. Would you like to do a session with me? Free of charge, of course.”

“Cut, cut,” Indy says, then, wringing her hands.

“We’ll want to film that, yeah?” Jared says, already beginning to round up the crew.

“Cool with me,” Archer says. “Just be ready. It’s a lot.”

Silence hangs. The entire crew is giving Indy the wide-eyed, overprotective *are you sure you’re okay with this?* look.

Indy plays with her rings, staring at a distant spot on the floor, eyes unfocused. Contemplating.

“You don’t have to,” Archer says, her fidgety hands mirroring Indy’s. “But I think it’ll be very beneficial for us.”

Indy meets her gaze, finally. She slots her ring back into place where she’d been aimlessly twirling it around her finger before.

“Let’s do it,” she declares, standing up. A crew member rushes to retape her mic.

Sybil floats over to Indy as they begin to pack up, and right in her face, so close they’re nearly nose-to-nose, she mouths, “are you sure?”

Indy nods. She knows she doesn’t have to say anything else: Sybil offers a warm, worn half-smile, one that comes from years of understanding Indy on a cellular level.

“Ready?” Archer asks.

“Yes,” Indy says, and she, Sybil, and the 15-odd other crew members know that, for the first time in a long, long while, she truly means it.

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Archer leads her and the crew down the hall to a locked door colored in eggplant purple—their purple, as Indy has learned. Up a small, narrow staircase, they’re guided up to an attic sanctuary, complete with ambient lighting and abstract watercolors on the walls, which are an eggshell blue. *Think of all the powerful women who have been in this room*, she tells herself. *Think of all the secrets this room holds*. Rituals past wash over her all at once. Her skin covered in elaborate paintings, the odd soothe

of the brushes over her skin. A “re-baptism” where the room smelled like cloves and she thought she might drown.

It’s one thing to be outside of the ritual—to be able to point out its idiosyncrasies, to scoff at its ridiculousness. Immersing oneself in it is always scary, perhaps, because it makes it so *real*.

In this room they face each other again, but this time closer, knees brushing. At Archer’s request to “match the mood”, the crew is silent, reverent, moving quickly in her periphery.

Archer explains that they’re going to do some simple breathing exercises first, as they’ve done once before. Breathe in for four seconds, hold the breath for seven, exhale for eight. Over and over and over. *Four, seven, eight. Four, seven, eight.*

She makes a big show of taking her gloves off, delighting in the quiet *plink, plink, plink* of her rings on the table.

“Now, the best way for me to do this is to hold your face,” Archer says. “If that’s okay. I have other ways if you’re more comfortable, but this is the most effective.”

“Can I look at your hands first?”

The question stuns Archer. “Sure,” she says, slowly turning her hands palms-up. Indy peers over, running a single finger over her palm, gently. It’s always a marvel, how exploring these places can make the ordinary feel extraordinary. The sight of bare hands feels like an ancient, long-hidden secret.

“Sorry I’m weirdly touching you,” Indy says, incredulous.

“Sorry I weirdly interrupted our interview,” Archer offers in return.

A shared nervous chuckle erupts between them and the crew.

“Okay. Eyes closed. Forget everyone else is in the room.” Indy feels Archer cupping her face, running her thumbs over her eyelids. “Just relax,” she says, rubbing gentle circles with her fingertips. “Feel your muscles switching off. Just focus on the sound of my voice. Acknowledge any wandering thoughts as they are: just thoughts.”

It’s nothing, and then, at once, a blinding explosion of everything. Indy suddenly sees it all-- her life flashing before her eyes, an incredibly literal play-out of the expression she’s always heard. Every cry, all of the trauma from two years ago, the sound of the doorknob rattling, the college breakup that left her skipping class for a week, her mother crying in labor, out-of-body, floating, watching time folding in on itself--

As slap-in-the-face-quickly as the feeling came, she jerks out of it, against Archer’s grip, akin to the falling, breathless feeling between consciousness and sleep, jolted awake against your will.

She's crying. When she looks up, Archer is too, but she's smiling through it, furiously dabbing at her beautiful, immaculate, bronzed makeup.

"What the hell was that?" Indy manages to choke out, accepting Archer's hurried offer of tissues.

"It's... a lot, I know. Just ride the wave. Ride the wave," Archer says. Indy hears Jared signaling *cut*, the worried whispers of the crew. Archer joins their hands together, and suddenly, everything feels in-place, upright, again. Whole, healed. They cycle through the breathing exercise one more time: *four, seven, eight. Four, seven, eight. Four, seven, eight.*

"Crying is good. It's a necessary human release," Archer says, still wiping away at stray tears at the corner of her eyes long after Indy's have subsided. "I should have warned you. I'm sorry. I didn't want you to come in with any preconceived notions. It's harder to do what I need to do if you're guarded."

"Well..." Indy starts. "Thank you, actually. I think... I think I needed that? I haven't had a good cry in a while." Then, she asks: "Do you usually cry too?"

"Depends." Archer excuses herself to a tiny bathroom with an undetectable door, leaving the door ajar, blowing her nose. Indy watches her fiddle with her hair in the mirror, watches her wipe the last vestiges of runny mascara from the corner of her eyes with her pinky finger. It's deeply human.

Her subjects usually fit neatly into two categories: cruel or deluded. Archer, Indy thinks, seems to be neither: warm, welcoming, so convinced of her own ability.

"Sorry about that," she continues, shutting the door, joining Indy once again in the chairs. "I usually like to have whoever's here give an affirmation, if you don't mind." She takes Indy's hands in hers again. "Just whatever comes to mind. It can be a sentence, or a word, or whatever."

Indy takes a deep breath in, and lets the sentence tumble out: "I am letting go and releasing fears that no longer serve me."

"I like that one," Archer whispers. "Let's say it together."

*"I am letting go and releasing fears that no longer serve me."*

Archer squeezes her hands before they both open their eyes again. "So? How do you feel?"

"Good," Indy says. "A little... exposed? But good."

"You wouldn't believe some of the shit I've seen in people," Archer reassures her. "You're a good person, with a good heart. You've been through a lot. But you're resilient. Strong. Incredibly creative."

“I’m also *so* hungry,” Indy adds, searching for her phone. “God, what time is it?”

Two hours have passed, somehow. It’s nearly time for dinner.

Archer laughs. “Come, come,” she says. “I’ll make you something before we continue.”

When they shuffle back into the studio, Jared suggests they walk through the pieces she keeps here. “A great way to talk about your art, and your spirituality,” he says. “That way, you two don’t have to stay stagnant. Sound good?”

“Perfect,” Archer says. “Follow me.” She sidles up next to a cloaked canvas, at least ten feet tall. She whisks the cover off, revealing a half-finished oil painting. Its outline is clear: a group of women huddled in a circle on a hill, under the sun, arms above their head, with a glowing, multicolored thread connected through each of their hands.

“Ready, everyone?” Jared asks. There’s a clatter of chaos as the crew adjusts the equipment, focuses on just the right angle. “Alright. Three... two... one... action.”

“Tell us about this piece you’re working on. This is massive,” Indy says.

“It’s very much an homage to what we do here. Women from all walks of life, athletes, artists, dreamers of all kinds. Connected by a single thread: committing to our higher selves, to each other, rather than a prescribed timeline, prescribed expectations.”

“This is stunning,” Indy marvels. She hovers a hand along the thread. “I’m really transfixed by this thread. What do you think keeps that thread so strong between you all? There has to be a lot of trust there to say, you know, ‘I’m going to stay unmarried, live on a commune two hours from civilization, and commit to this higher purpose with a hundred other women.’”

Archer nods. “When you’re here, you can be your truest self. You’re pushed to grow. When you get rid of all the noise—literal, and figurative, you’re surprised by how much you can hear your mind, and your heart, telling you things you’ve always longed to hear. When you’re in community with other women experiencing that same transcendence, it’s easy to uplift each other. That’s what keeps the circle of trust so tight. At the end of the day, I’m here for the same reasons as anyone else. I—the Council and I, I mean-- just took care of the logistics.”

“I love that. What about this one?”

This work is a sculpture, comprised of translucent, multicolored hands, all overlapping, gripping one another in some way.

“When I paint,” Archer starts, “I’m interpreting something from my reality. If I feel like I can’t do that adequately in two dimensions, I sculpt. I really allow myself to play when I do that—to create a new reality. I don’t work with glass often, and when I do, I want to make a point. This

represents all of the connections I have made—and will make—through my gift of heightened empathy. I wanted to make these out of glass to emphasize how fragile, how beautiful, these connections are—and at the same time, how heavy they are. I carry these women’s stories with me everywhere I go.”

“Now you’re carrying mine too,” Indy says. “Can I be that teal hand over there? It’s my favorite color.”

Archer laughs. “Yes. That’s absolutely you.”

This gallery walk continues for a while longer, Indy’s hands clasped behind her back as Archer explains each work in progress, all intricate, colorful vignettes into her psyche, into the Hunt’s collective spirituality. It’s a perfect common ground between them-- Indy’s knowledge from her curator mother and Archer’s earnest belief, and skill, so plainly present in her work.

The last work is a painting of women sat in a living room, sitting on floors and on couches, limbs loose, clutching jewel-toned glasses of every shape and size. At the center of it all, gaze directed towards the viewer, is a woman with long, gray hair, tied in a neat braid down to her waist. Her legs are crossed, and she wears a long, cobalt dress, shimmery fabric pooled around her.

“Last, but not least,” Indy says. “Who is this beautiful woman?”

Archer spins a tale of her grandmother, Grandmère. “She raised me, and she’s my biggest inspiration in everything.” She says. She explains that was an artist, too: a glassblower. She was best known for her elaborate drink glasses— “you could find one on nearly every Texas socialite’s bar cart at some point”, Archer laughs. She would have these glamorous monthly salons where women from the far reaches of Texas-- Amarillo, Laredo, even Juarez-- would gather in their living room once a month. A meeting of the minds. Heiresses, entrepreneurs, mechanics, politicians. Always a days-long affair over a long weekend. The week before, Grandmère would enlist Archer to help clean her quirky collection of cocktail glasses. The picture of grace even when she was up to her elbows in soap bubbles. Once the women arrived, two by two, she would perch on the steps, peering through the banister and listening to the fantastical musings of these wise, wise women. A traveling show of somebodies in a town of nobodies.

“That’s what this place is, really,” she sighs, wistfully. “Grandmère’s salon, all the time.”

“I love that,” Indy says. “I feel like we’re good for tonight, yeah?” she asks the crew, barely stifling a yawn. Jared nods. It’s nearly midnight. “Thank you so much, Archer,” she says, taking her hands, a rare moment of affection spurred on by their weird, newfound closeness.

Archer squeezes. “No problem. Do you feel okay?”

Indy nods. "I feel great."

"Get some rest, everyone," Jared calls to the room, wading through the crowd to help pack up equipment. Early call time tomorrow."



## 4

At seven-thirty sharp, after letting her alarm blare for fifteen minutes, Indy finally unwraps herself from her comforter. There's the usual fuss of finding the hallway light switches by touch in the dim, blue-dawn glow, the coffee machine gurgling awake, the mundane survey of the living room while she waits.

The guest house sits on a hill, and as she peers out the window, she sees the flickers of lights below, the motions of hundreds of women stirring to greet their morning.

In an hour, she'll file in with them: Sofi, the woman behind the Hunt's signature eggplant-purple garb, has graciously gifted her a Huntress piece of her own, hanging in her closet. A square-necked, puffy-sleeved, flowy dress, brushing just above her ankles. It's beyond beautiful, but it's jarring to look in the mirror at her unkempt, still-puffy face and say, *yes, this is me*. She's been gifted ceremonial garb before, cloaks and harem pants and other fantastical things, but never something this luxurious.

At eight-thirty, Indy and crew shuffle into the unmarked white building next to the rec center. It's a wide-open, warehouse-like space, with chairs set up in wide concentric circles. Sun pours in from the glass skylights above, casting an ethereal glow on the room.

Most women are already in place, cloaked in their purple. Dresses, blazers, scarves. Their heads turn when she enters, smiling, scooting their chairs to invite her in. Sofi rises from her chair in the innermost circle, squeezing through the rows of women to meet Indy. "We're so glad you're here," she says. "You look wonderful."

Women part to let them through, complimenting Indy as she passes. Indy's seat is between Sofi and Tess, who says the same, tight-lipped and stoic, with a firm hand on her shoulder: "happy you're here, Indy."

In the center are Archer and Dorothy, the woman set to receive her commitment ring, in chairs facing one another, chatting with their hands entwined. Dorothy, as Indy remembers fondly from months-ago headlines, is a climate activist well-known for her elaborate performance protests: recently, she was arrested for holding a very public, rowdy funeral for a glacier. Archer is wearing an elaborate gold headpiece, crafted in delicate wire, matching her glowy eyelids, her intricate rings, the shimmery tulle of her gloves. They're completely engrossed in each other: Indy wonders if this is how she looked in Archer's home yesterday, faces puffy from crying, moving as one unit. She

watches them until, moments later, Archer untangles her fingers from Dorothy's and rises from her chair, raising her hands with palms turned upward. The room's attention snaps to her.

"Sisters," she starts. "Today, our dear Dorothy is fully committing to our fold. She is sitting where many of you once sat. Think of yourself in this seat. We are her. She is us."

"We are each other. We honor each other," the group responds. "We are her. We honor her."

"I am you," Dorothy says.

"And I am you," Archer says to her, taking her hands again.

"Just follow me," Sofi whispers to Indy, seeing her panicked expression.

Archer brandishes a ring from her pocket: a gold band, with a deep, emerald-green stone.

"Dorothy, you were chosen because you are an expert in your field. You are a shining beacon of what every woman should want to be like. You are a world changer, a risk taker, a tastemaker. I bought this ring in a little shop in Lima, Peru—where, funnily enough, your mother is from. The affirmation that I gave it is *I am imagining a better world*. You, with your activism and your commitment to a greener earth, are doing just that. This ring symbolizes a bond that is bigger than you, bigger than me, bigger than all of us. The path we choose as women of the Hunt is not an easy one, but the reward is beyond anything you could ever imagine. To be in communion with these women. To know that you are loved. You are held. You will be held."

"You are held," the crowd echoes, Indy saying it in turn. "You will be held."

Archer slips the ring on Dorothy's finger, presses their foreheads together. She slides her thumbs up to Dorothy's dusk-colored eyelids.

"Let go of whatever you are holding onto," Archer commands. "You are on the way forward. You *are* the way forward. Let go. Let go. Let go."

She takes a deep, dramatic inhale-exhale with Dorothy, who is holding onto her wrists.

The group does the same, for a few cycles. Breathing as one.

"Let go," they say in unison after a few cycles.

Sofi hooks her arm through Indy's. "Ready?" she whispers. Before Indy has time to respond, the inner circle stands and moves in, stretching out their hands to lay them on Dorothy. After an inhale-exhale, she feels the second circle close in, a light pressure at her back. Then, the third, closing them in, making her break out in a light sheen of sweat, a tangle of hands reaching in, touching each other.

"Let go," they say again.

Dorothy opens her mouth like she wants to speak but keeps breathing in sharp gulps. The group breathes with her.

Finally, after a few rounds of this, she speaks: “I am letting go.” A joyous, raucous wave of energy flows through the crowd, who whoops and hollers, closing in on Dorothy. The group disbands, but still cling to each other in soft, barely-there ways: hands still twined, arms wrapped around one another. Sofi has a hand on Indy’s back.

“What did you think?” Sofi asks once the group has disbanded, fielding a few over-the-shoulder *I love you!s* as she walks with the herd toward the exit.

“It was a lot,” Indy says. “But it always is. It was very beautiful. Very chic,” she adds, swishing her skirt with her free hand. “Thank you for this.”

“Keep it,” Sofi says. “You look marvelous in our purple.”

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Afterwards, the crowd languidly migrates to the dining hall for lunch. The tables are cloaked in purple cloth, the placemats standing out against them in shimmering, gold discs, glowing under the skylight. This, too, is another oddity of the job: how everyone snaps into normalcy, cackling over glasses of champagne and sparkling water.

Indy has been invited to sit at the Council’s table, where Dorothy and Archer are sat next to each other, still chatting just between them. Crowds of women periodically flock to Dorothy, laying hands on her shoulders, hugging her. *You are so loved*, they keep saying, amid a litany of other affirmations.

The crew, after taking a lap with B-roll footage, signals to Indy, and she nods, takes the opportunity of a lull in conversation to lean in. “Dorothy, can we get a moment with you?”

“Oh, yes, of course,” she responds.

“Don’t keep her for too long, you,” Archer says, winking.

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

I: Will you state your name? Just for intro purposes, yadda yadda.

D: Of course. My name is Dorothy Reed. I’m a climate scientist and activist.

I: What's your gut reaction about everything that just happened in there?

Dorothy takes a second to ponder before her eyes well up, her face scrunching. "Can we stop for a second?" She asks. "Sorry." She's smiling as she takes a tissue from a gracious intern, shoulders wracking with emotion.

D: God, I'm so sorry. I didn't expect to cry like that right out of the gate! Jesus.

I: You're okay. Don't worry about it.

D: Thank you. Anyways. God, where do I begin? I've never felt so whole in my life. So held.

I: What made you want to commit yourself to this?

D: Everyone in my life told me I was being ridiculous, which, as always, made me want to do it even more. I've always felt out of place. I care so deeply for our planet; I've always felt like I could make a home anywhere. Home has been a lot of places, across a lot of continents. But I've never felt so at home like I do out here. It's a place that's entirely my own, but also belongs to all of us. It's interesting how it works that way. We really are each other. We are one unit, made up of all these unique moving parts.

Later, after the interviews are over and she's chatted through three courses of ridiculous overindulgence, Indy steps through the threshold of the guest house with heavy eyelids and fussy hands, already unbuttoning her dress. She feels like she's suffocating.

Finally, after she wrestles it over her head, she feels as if she's returned to herself again. A kind gesture, Indy thinks, carefully bundling it into the laundry basket, but a disturbing ask: although she'd murmured *we are one* out of respect, she can't help but feel slimy. She takes a moment to breathe, to ground herself in the dull hum of the air conditioner.

Wrapping herself in her own clothes again, she falls into a deep afternoon nap before she even folds the sheets and comforter back over herself, laid bare atop the fitted sheet.

Sybil gently rouses her a few hours later with a hand on her shoulder, which makes her feel like she's in the fray of the Huntresses again, making her gasp. It feels like no time has passed.

"Dinner?" She asks, and Indy, wiping her eyes, graciously nods, mumbles an affirmative *mhm*, once again feeling upright, feeling like herself.

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Indy and Sybil begin to take walks every evening after dinner, like clockwork, guided by the soft illumination of the stone paths. This is the way they help themselves cling to normalcy: in Norway, it was sunrise yoga; in Japan, it was the same sake bar, always at 9pm sharp; in the middle of the Pacific, it was mid-afternoon sunbathing. Creating a short-lived routine to keep time in places where time feels wavy, untethered, unreal. It gives them a place to debrief, a place to complain; more often than not, they use it to sit in silence, a break from the noise of production, kept company by each other's slow, methodic breathing.

Most nights here, they've been graciously invited onto porches, into living rooms, spacious attics, studio spaces, given enough material for hours upon hours of footage and recordings. They circle new parts of the commune each time they wander-- it feels boundless. A hundred tall houses speckled against the horizon: a spectacular sight they'll never get used to.

This corner of the commune is home to the Council, a circle of their signature-purple houses, all facing one another. Just down the hill from Archer's place. In the middle lies a stone fountain, carved in the shape of cupped hands, water flowing from the fingertips.

"Beautiful, but a bit much," Sybil says.

"Good tagline for this place," Indy replies. In the same instant, she notices a flurry of activity in a nearby living-room window: the rest of the houses are dark, blinds shuttered, only lit by flickering porch lights. She elbows Sybil. "Look."

The Council has been frustratingly hard to reach this week, a rotating door of voicemails and out-of-town excuses. One bluntly declined being interviewed: a single email that read "Thanks, but no thanks." Inching closer, the pair see the whole scene: the women gathered around the kitchen island, hands flying in intense conversation. One woman puts her head in her hands. Another sticks an accusatory, pointing finger in the middle of another's chest. The few others are sighing, arms

crossed, twiddling their hands. After a minute or two, they cluster together again, disappearing upstairs. One hastily closes the blinds.

“Should we knock?” Indy finds herself surprised at her own boldness.

“*Should we knock?*” Sybil mocks. “God, no. They looked like they were about to rip each other’s throats out.”

“We leave in two days,” Indy says. “Who knows when we’ll catch them all together like this again?”

Sybil sighs. “You have a point.”

“Great,” Indy says, hooking her arm in the crook of Sybil’s elbow and dragging her along the path.

They hear a dull roar of voices as soon as they near the welcome mat, which reads *come as you are*. Indy takes that as a challenge and knocks with three sharp raps. There’s a beat of silence, then the sound of heels clacking down the stairs. A short, strong-browed woman, cloaked in an eggplant-purple jumpsuit, answers the door, out of breath. “Oh, you’re the T.V. people, right? Hi!” She introduces herself, but they already know who she is: Pilar Soto, CEO of an upscale wellness company, a frequent darling of *30 Under 30* lists everywhere. “We’re in the middle of a meeting, but we’ll be right with you,” she chirps. “Help yourself to water, wine, anything. Make yourself comfortable.”

“Can I use your restroom?” Sybil asks.

“Sure,” Pilar responds, slightly stunned. “Follow me upstairs.”

Indy settles into the soft cushions of the giant magenta couch, pulling out her phone and scrolling through her missed texts. After a minute or two, she sets it next to her, stretching her arms above her head, cracking her neck. From her spot, she can see straight-through to the back of the house. The back hallway is only illuminated by the blue twilight outside, but in the mere seconds before she picks up her phone again, she can just make out the silhouette of a tall man—who barely conceals a deep, throaty cough—slipping out the back door.

Sybil comes back bounding down the stairs, settling next to Indy. She leans in to whisper: “there was a man up there. I saw him.”

“I saw him leave,” Indy murmurs through her teeth, smiling at the Council buzzing downstairs. They stand to greet them. “You’re quite the elusive bunch,” Indy greets them, shaking their hands.

“Just busy, that’s all,” Tess, Archer’s right-hand woman, says, grinning with a cold undercurrent.

“The woman who took down the Kindred, in the flesh,” Jamilah, best known for being the face of five Olympic gold medals and the chic athletic wear of every Brooklyn twenty-something, chimes in. “Props.”

Sybil is furiously texting, and Indy gives her a not-so-subtle jab in the shin under the table. Sybil kicks her back.

“Indy darling, I just got in from London, I’m *much* too jetlagged for camera,” Emilia—probably one of the most recognizable models in the world, long-limbed and knuckle-deep in a bowl of chocolates, says, settling onto a stool and kicking off her heels.

“Ask us anything, ladies,” Pilar says.

“You wouldn’t mind if the crew came over and took some footage, would you?” Sybil asks.

Then, there’s a pounding at the door: “I guess we have no choice,” Tess says under her breath. Sure enough, the crew, summoned by Sybil, is huddled in the doorway when it swings open, shivering with the nighttime chill.

Most of the Council agrees to a single-camera interview, with Indy lobbying questions from a chair next to Jared. Tess insists that *anything I have to say is boring, please, I handle the scheduling*, but continues to comment from the sidelines. It’s mostly a regurgitation of the same diatribe Archer gave her—*enlightenment, a space for us, the Inner Work*. Recollections of their college days, of the early days of building. When Indy presses, they press back—in a poised, near-imperceptible way. They don’t talk about Archer so much as they talk about the community itself, the way they built it from the ground up. They keep referring to a ubiquitous *we* when she presses about Archer. *We* built this place. *We* are so grateful. *We* work hard. Curious.

Around midnight, Indy starts to nod off on Jared’s shoulder. “I think we’ve got everything we need. Thanks, everyone,” he says, gently nudging Indy’s head.

“Hm? Oh, yes, thank you.” Indy stirs, rubbing her eyes. “Sorry about that. It’s been a long week.”

Deflections aside, it’s understandable how these women came to be Archer’s lifelong friends: they’re complimentary, warm, inviting. Gracious with the crew and with Indy. As is customary with the women of the Hunt, they offer everyone some much-needed food, giggling and wrestling through the charcuterie prep as if the round-table frustration had never happened.

This is what Indy has grown especially fond of at the Hunt: the importance of a shared meal. Over the next two days, she counts the hours this way: sangria over dinner, an enlightening lunch with an Olympic skier in her offseason, the bag of veggie crisps she downs on a sleepless night, leaving crumbs in the sheets.

Sybil is near-silent on their walk back to the guest house. Indy can't stop yawning, dragging her feet through the pebbled path. Once they make it back, sleepily groping along the wall for the light switches, Sybil pipes up: "I got a recording."

"Of what?" Indy yawns again, stripping her jacket.

"Their little *meeting*. That man. I cracked the bathroom door open. I can't guarantee if it's any good, but it's something."

Indy walks over to where Sybil is leaned against the kitchen counter and huddles over her phone. Sybil presses it between their ears.

It's distant, mostly muffled. They can make out the edges of sentences now and again: *investment. Change. You need to shake things up.* They catch his name, said in an exasperated sigh: *Jordan, please.*

*Where's your dear Prophet tonight?* They hear him distinctly asking.

*She won't be involved in any of this,* they hear another say. Unmistakably Tess. *We'll have to do some... rearranging.*

Then, the recording screeches: a door creaking open. Then, the sink runs, crackling in the speakers, and Indy hears the clatter of Sybil rushing to stop the recording.

"Too good to be true," Sybil says. "Just like you said."

Indy's mouth flattens into a hard, anxious line. "We're in a very precarious place with this. No real evidence of anything."

"But it's also hard to deny *something's* going on."

"We can't broadcast pure speculation."

Sybil sighs. "You're right."

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Over the next several days, Indy falls into a routine of daily life at the Hunt. After the night at the Council's house, everything around her begins to appear desaturated. The commune doesn't



sparkle with the same newness anymore: it's settled back into the mundane, women mostly keeping to themselves and going about their days. Everyone is still unfailingly friendly, especially Archer.

One night finds Indy on Archer's balcony at sunset, talking to the married farmers down the road who supply everything for the commune. They are technically the only defectors, she learns. Two strangers nudged together by their identical blue houses, side by side. Annika, the older of the two, points them out in the distance, squinting: "see? We used to sit out on those porch swings almost every morning, drinking our coffees, trying to act like we weren't staring at each other."

"It was hard. Deciding to leave. But I'm glad we get to still be out here, and kind of be a small part of everything," Hollis, her wife, says.

"Were you sad to see them go?" Indy asks Archer, who has been mostly quiet, nursing a glass of green juice.

"Of course," she answers. "But most good things are fleeting, right?" Their love for each other outweighed the sadness she felt from their absence, she explains. "I think that might be the biggest misconception of what we do here. "All of us being unmarried isn't necessarily designed to be permanent," she says. "People change. People grow. I think we run on the ministry of *Nowness*, you know? Obviously, I think about our future a lot, but we also value the *Now* so, so much."

Indy nods. It's fascinating to hear, after years of cult leaders demanding forever. She wonders how true that statement could be, if Annika and Hollis still live just up the road, if no one else has truly left. This, too, is a common tool of the people she studies: the *illusion* of freedom, the gospel of "you can do whatever you want—for a price". She decides not to press further in front of the couple, but makes her puzzled expression known.

After they say a heartfelt goodbye, lingering on Archer's porch for a long moment, Indy finds herself leaning against Archer's doorframe, accepting an invitation to come back up to the balcony. This will be the first time they're truly alone. "Come back up!" She insists. "We'll soak in those last few minutes of daylight."

As she walks up the stairs behind Archer, she takes the moment to text Sybil and Jared: *I'm alone with Archer just fyi*

Remembering the last time she was alone with one of her subjects, his too-white teeth, the unfeeling darkness of his office, makes her breath hitch.

"You okay?" Archer asks over her shoulder.

“Just out of breath,” Indy says, laughing it off as they step back into the early-evening glow. Archer flops back onto her hammock chair, swinging for a moment with her eyes closed. Indy settles on the futon across from her.

Archer sits up, opening her eyes and taking a big, dramatic yawn. She surveys all the houses below with fondly squinted eyes. “You wouldn’t believe what this place looked like when it was empty. In the early days, we all used to live here, at my place. Just us and all this open space. Six women. Minimal heating. Two bathrooms. It was the only way we could afford to get the land initially. You can imagine how well that went. We used to sit up here and joke that you could see to the edge of the earth. It was insane.”

“I can imagine,” Indy says. “Do you regret anything you’ve done here?”

Archer’s eyes widen. “Bold question. I like it.” She pauses for a moment, running a nervous hand through her hair. Her gloves today are a brick red, and Indy admires them as she rests her chin on her balled-up fists. “Hm. I guess... I regret how my personal life has become so business-like. When you go into business with your friends, things can sometimes feel... transactional?” She says. “I hope that answers your question.”

“So you’re saying you’re not in it for the money?”

“Oh god, no. Of course, I have my indulgences, but I don’t like to handle the money, like, at *all*. That’s where the Council comes in.”

“I talked to them last night, you know.”

“Really?” Archer sits up further, plants her feet on the ground. “They didn’t tell me you were filming last night.”

Indy starts to backtrack: “it was kind of last-minute.”

Archer nods, staring ahead with a far-away wistfulness Indy can’t quite place. She quickly changes the subject.

They continue their conversation as the sun sets. Indy’s surprised at herself for how much she genuinely likes Archer: for a minute, she forgets she’s talking to a subject. Archer points at the fading colorful dots of houses in the distance and imbues Indy with their stories. When it becomes too dark, too cold, to justify staying outside, Indy heads back next door to the guest house with a spring in her step.

“Did you have fun on your date?” Sybil asks from the couch.

“Shut up.”

The rest of their time at the commune is spent steeped in community. Indy rarely gets a moment alone, much less with Archer. She sits in on a group therapy session one day and rolls out of bed at 5 a.m. for sunrise yoga the next. The crew trails her on a group hike, a morning meditation, a painting class. Their itinerary is packed wall-to-wall with more and more friendly faces willing to be interviewed about their experience. The Council continues to elude them, despite Sybil's signature showrunner persistence.

Naturally, on their last day, Archer hosts a delicious, indulgent brunch at her place, with several residents in tow, as well as a few members of the Council. Mimosas in delicate flutes with gold rims, pancakes dotted with blueberries so fresh they dribble down Archer's chin, causing the table to erupt in laughter. Wesley, one of the cameramen, is capturing photos on a disposable camera. This makes Indy uneasy, but she supposes they've crossed so many lines already-- might as well capture the memories.

It's been hard to shake the recording. Indy knows full well it's been mentally playing on loop since last night: *we'll have to do some rearranging.*

At one point, Archer sidles up next to Indy and presses their shoulders together, snapping her attention with a hardly concealed *pssst*. "I have something for you," she whispers. "Follow me upstairs." Another line crossed.

Indy nods, despite herself, and joins her.

"I promise I'm not going to make you cry this time," Archer says over her shoulder.

"That's reassuring."

Archer ushers her into her office, which is bare-bones minimal in contrast to the rest of the house. White walls, white bookshelves, peppered with thick art books. Archer pulls a small cloth bag out of a drawer. It's Hunt-purple, of course, tied with gold ribbon.

Indy pulls it open, pocketing the ribbon. She dumps the contents into the palm of her hand: a ring, made of twisted, delicately-spun gold, interspersed with flecks of iridescent, opaline stone.

"Weirdly, I bought this on the day of your trial. I remember it so vividly. I was in Mexico City. I walked around the Museo Frida to center myself. I was really distraught that day, for whatever reason. Wondering what to do next. I was at a real crossroads with everything I was doing here. I saw you on TV, standing up to your harassers in court, and thought, 'wow, I don't know her, but I want that resilience.'"

I popped into this market and found this ring. I like to set intentions with them, and then set them free when I see fit. For this one, I said, *I am resilient*. and I thought, someday, I'll give it to someone with resilience. I thought it was fitting to give it to the woman who inspired it."

"It's beautiful," Indy says, and slips it on her left middle finger, as is customary with the women of the Hunt. "I don't normally take gifts."

"Think of it as a souvenir," Archer says. "Of course, you can come back whenever you'd like."

"I'll be back soon, I'm sure," Indy says. "B-roll. Follow-up questions. Fact checking."

"I'm glad this isn't goodbye."

"Thank you," Indy says. "Not just for this, but—for everything. This is my *big comeback*," she says, melodramatically flailing her hands. "As you know."

"I'm really grateful," Archer says. "You're going to tell our story beautifully. I just know it. I've already seen it in the way you ask questions."

"Thank you. Really."

Archer clasps their hands together, just as she did all those months ago. Indy squeezes back. They slip back downstairs, finishing out the rest of the celebration.

For a while, after they return home from the swaddled nest of the Hunt, the city bubbles with a bit of its magic. Kind strangers, delicious meals, words pouring out of Indy in long, syrupy stretches of uninterrupted flow. She's can't deny it: she's never felt this much mental clarity in her life.

Their documentary, after months of piecing together footage and building up anticipation, ends up breaking streaming records for not only *Minute* but for nearly every platform she's signed with. Their Head of Digital declares it, frantically running down the staircase from his office to hers, shaking the knickknacks on her desk, "the literal best thing she's ever done."

Archer sends a gracious handwritten note, with flowers:

*Indy—*

*You are brilliant beyond words. Thank you to you, Sybil, and the entire crew. I have more calls and emails asking for appointments than I know what to do with. We're very delightfully overwhelmed, to say the least.*

*Thank you for telling our story.*

*Love, A*

Reading her endearing sincerity, that crackly, 15-second clip plays over and over in Indy's head: *we'll have to do some rearranging.*

Months later, after Indy has slipped back into her version of normalcy—visiting one cult per month—and this season of her series continues to be a smash hit, she has a brush with Archer again, three names apart on a guest list for a wedding neither wants to attend. Both show up anyway, spinning their way around opposite corners of the room, unaware.

When both have slipped out unnoticed and found their way outside, minutes apart, they relish in the silence for a brief, fleeting moment. Then, Archer's voice, along with the clattering of metal, breaks the silence and emerges from behind a large, fragrant rosebush: "*dammit.*"

It's wonderful, Indy thinks as she saunters through the courtyard garden, to find camaraderie in this cloud of exhaustion and *now now now* hovering just above her head, a byproduct of a delayed, down-to-the-wire train ride and a dress held together by fashion tape and a prayer. It's a backwards blessing where a curse feels like an affirmation: yes, *dammit.* She's tired, *dammit.* The drinks are obviously watered down, *dammit.* Dinner was dry and is still stuck in her teeth, *dammit.*

The scene she finds when she turns the corner: Archer, strikingly beautiful, as always, the contents of her purse strewn across the stone path. Her dress is sage, her gloves emerald green. She's laughing to herself, gathering what she can into her hands.

Indy picks up a cracked blush. "Been there?"

Archer looks up, delighted. "Hey, you!"

"Mind if I sit?" Indy asks, after the last of it has been sorted and tucked away. The Prophet smiles, nods, wordlessly pats the space next to her.

"How are you? How are things? How do you know Cassie and Will?" They haven't spoken since the show's initial release, but Indy likes the relative ease they slip into.

"Will's a friend from the art world," she says. "They commissioned a piece from me for their foyer. A portrait of them. I'm sure you've seen it. How do you know them?"

"Friends from college. They're beautiful, but insufferable, which is why I'm out here."

Archer laughs. "I didn't want to say anything, I didn't think it was my place, but-- god, the *ice sculpture*? What were they thinking?"

"You're so right. Did you see the embroidered napkins?"

"Barf. Also, are these drinks super weak or is it just me?"

Archer rifles through her purse again, resurfacing with a matte, baby-blue flask. “Tess told me the extended family’s very, very Southern. Shall we?”

Weddings: the great equalizer. In this moment, it doesn’t matter who they are to each other anymore. They exchange nothing but a warm laugh and a generous pour of vodka, lamenting the uptight old ladies, elaborate floral displays, and frat-boy groomsmen that await them inside.

“You’re wearing it,” Archer says, apropos of nothing. “The ring I gave you.”

“Oh, this?” Indy says, embarrassed, admiring it as if it had appeared on her finger by pure coincidence. “I thought it went really well with this dress.”

“You’ve been caught, Miss *I Don’t Usually Take Gifts*.”

Indy rolls her eyes, fondly.

They delight in the joys of off-the-record conversation, catching up on how busy their lives have been. *Good busy*, they both chirp, curling perfectly opposite one another on the bench like quotation marks. Their conversation flows so easily, undeterred by the divide between interviewer and subject. Here, they’re just *Indy and Archer*.

Archer proposes a wild idea: “Forgive me if this is weird or overstepping, but we’ve already made the damn show, so-- do you want to get cake and leave?”

“Sure. I’d love to.” In the same instant, Indy texts Sybil, *you have my location, right?*

*-oh no what are you doing*

*-relax. I ran into archer at this wedding*

*-oh yes I am totally relaxed knowing you’re going to a cult leader’s apartment*

*-Idk maybe I’ll get some kind of intel - i’ll probably ditch in an hour*

*-okay just text me when you get home please*

They end up back at Archer’s apartment, which is on the thirty-second floor of a ridiculously sleek building, cake sandwiched between paper plates. Archer is already shedding her jewelry on the credenza when they walk in. The walls are a soft, creamy sage, similar to her dress. Archer’s own paintings dot the walls. The furniture, mostly white, looks brand-new, practically untouched.

“My little city escape,” she says, flicking on the lamps, fiddling with the fruit on the counter.

“*Little?*” Indy says, gawking at the floor-to-ceiling windows.

Archer laughs. They settle into the folds of her couch, shoes off, continuing their easy back-and-forth. Archer’s emerald-green gloves are perfectly flourishing her anecdote about the impossible quest to order blacker-than-black pigment for her latest project. Indy offers a few bits about her

own career: she's been offered a book deal. In a week's time, she's flying to Italy for a two-hour special episode on the following around Catholic saints.

"Indy, can I ask you something?"

"Anything."

"Why cults?" Indy's eyes go wide. "Oh, don't look at me like that. It's not a dirty word. You of all people should know that."

Indy pauses, considering. Time feels syrupy, stretchy. "It's fascinating, the lengths people will go to for community. For belonging." She starts. "My sister and I are children of immigrants. For a long time, when we came here, all we had were each other. Why cults? Honestly, paperwork-wise, it was kind of a fluke." She laughs. "I heard about that commune in Tokyo all those years ago and felt this far-away longing, and that was it. It's been the journey of my life. I say that being so young— God, what will I do next? I'm avoiding thinking about that for as long as possible. With everything that's happened to me, I've had to be like, *is it all worth it?* But otherwise, that's why. Community. Belonging. Being a sucker for human interest stories."

"Was it all worth it?" Archer asks.

"Yes," Indy replies. "I think you've reminded me of that."

Archer smiles. "That's good to hear."

"Can I ask *you* something?"

"It's only fair."

"What would you be doing if you weren't doing this?"

Archer raises an eyebrow. She tilts her head back and forth, considering. "I don't know. You can't exactly put *known cult leader* on your resume."

Indy snorts. "You are the most bizarre person I've ever met."

"I am *not* the most bizarre person you've ever met. I know that for a fact. I saw the silent colony episode." They both laugh so hard they're gasping for air, doubled over, slouched in disbelief. "God, Indy, I have a million more questions."

Indy does too, in turn.

When she texts Sybil to tell her *I'm home!* it's nearly three in the morning.

---

It's been difficult to explain their friendship-- if she can even call it that. How to explain her affinity for a cult leader?

“You saw the show,” was the answer for her puzzled sister, rocking her newborn son on her hip. “Sybil likes her, too.”

They’ve left the T.V. on, and the trailer for her own show keeps playing on a loop just loud enough to pull her focus. Her own voice narrating the intro, over and over: *hi, it’s been a while. If you’ve forgotten, I’m Indy Kirkwood, and I join cults so you don’t have to.* It cuts to a clip with her and Archer facing one another, laughing, leaning in. Pilar from the Council, grinning at the camera, saying *we’re serious about wellness here. Very serious.* A raucous shot of the Group session, the ring ceremony, with the crowd swaying together in a purple mass. The final shot: Archer, her hands cupping Indy’s face, their foreheads nearly pressed together, saying *let go. Let go.* Once again, her own voice mocking her: *hi, it’s been a while. If you’ve forgotten--*

“I know, I know,” Cecelia says, glancing over at the T.V., finally muting it, to Indy’s relief. “I just—” She sighs, dropping the remote, swaddling Noah into a soft, striped blanket. “How can you trust her so easily? After everything you’ve been through?”

“Cecelia,” she says, quietly, as to keep the nieces-- both at curious, nosy ages-- from eavesdropping. “I think I know my limits.”

“That’s what you said before.”

Indy takes a sharp inhale. Cleansing exhale. *Four, seven, eight,* she hears Archer saying.

“I know you can handle yourself,” Cecelia starts again, wandering from the living room to the kitchen to hand Noah to her husband. When she circles back, she pulls her into a soft, cleansing hug. “If you had to watch me be stalked by a cult, you’d be saying the same thing.”

Indy huffs. This has always been Cecelia’s grievance with Indy’s career: constantly lecturing her about the danger Indy is already hyperaware of. She’s learned to tune out most of what Cecelia says, an endless stream of *and alsos*, her endearing, annoying worry.

Then begins the long, slow goodbye that always happens with Cecelia, five containers of leftovers balanced in her hands, a borrowed jacket slung over her shoulder. “Proud of you,” Cecelia says, finally.

“Love you,” Indy says, letting herself concede. Cecelia always means well—even if her love comes wrapped in a snappy package.

“Love you too, kid,” Cecelia says, pressing a kiss to her cheek.

Indy lets the rhythmic rumble of the train ride home lure her into the beginnings of sleep. When she finally arrives at her apartment, she takes a melatonin pill, letting it drag her further down, until she swaddles herself into a dreamless cocoon.



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Indy wakes, mere hours later, to her phone buzzing incessantly on her bedside table. She lets it ring to the outer edges of her ringtone, but then sees the name just before it goes to voicemail:

*Archer.*

They've kept semi-frequent contact since the wedding—shared a drink or two, run into each other at events. Between her and Archer, there's Friendship with a capital F, yes, but not quite middle-of-the-night-call Friendship. Easier to blame this on a dream, she figures. Everything still feels heavy with sleep.

Still, she accepts.

“H'llo?”

“Hey.” She sounds anxious, wide-awake. “Do you still live at the Wise building? In Brooklyn? Apartment... 5C?”

“Yeah?”

“Okay, good.” She exhales deeply, a crackly thing, like waves crashing through the phone speaker. “I'm outside your door.”

“Okay,” Indy says, swinging her legs over the side of the bed, letting herself shut her eyes for a second longer. “I'm coming.” Unfurling herself from her blanket, she messily reties her undone bun while she shuffles across the living room, checking the peephole, clicking the locks.

When she swings the door open, Archer is wringing her hands, and immediately pulls Indy into a hug. There's a tightness in her shoulders, her hands, an unshakable, heavy worry. “Hi,” she says, shaky, once she lets go. “I'm sorry. I didn't know where else to go.”

Indy shuffles her in, still rubbing her eyes, flicking on the Edison bulbs in the kitchen. The melatonin is still attempting to grab her attention and slide her eyelids shut. “Do you want tea?” Archer nods. Indy takes comfort in the ritual of picking a mug, putting the kettle on to boil. Comfort in taking a moment to gather herself and not look at Archer, disheveled and winded.

“What happened?” Indy asks, once she's wrestled out of the dregs of sleep and rubbed her eyes.

“Remember when you asked me what else I would be doing, if not this? I've been thinking about it for a while. Leaving.”

“Why now? Why me?” She asks, as she had all those months ago, facing each other in those lavender chairs.

The closed-off answer, which Archer mostly says to her shoes: “I’m not ready to talk about it yet.”

The incisive Indy, the journalist in her, wants to press.

Instead, at-home Indy, in an act of weary kindness, replies: “that’s fine. The couch pulls out.”

Indy takes a seat at the counter, letting Archer take the reins of the space, getting herself ready for bed. When she finally settles onto the pull-out couch, she unfastens her gloves—a soft mauve, with gold hardware—and sets them on the side table. She sets her bag on the floor: it overflows with hastily-packed fabric, a rogue hairbrush, a set of keys. She cracks her knuckles, folds her hands on her stomach.

“Thank you, Indy,” she says, softly.

“You so graciously hosted *me*. Think of it as returning the favor.”

Archer waves a dismissive hand. “Please. I practically gave you no choice.”

“We do have a tiny problem,” Indy says, feeling her eyes bloom further open, finally. “I’m going to South America with Sybil to work on my book. For two months. And we leave in three days.”

Archer sits up immediately. “Could I come?”

Indy’s face twists before she can stop herself. “Well— um—”

“A year ago, if someone presented you a potential out, you would have tried to take it, no matter how absurd, right? The situation I’m in is *that* dire.”

Indy puts her head in her hands for a few moments. Then, she emerges, holds up a finger, thinking. “We’re going on the company’s dime,” she starts. “But I suppose if I *happened* to tell you the flight number... and you *happened* to be on the same flight... and I told my contact to save me an extra seat on the bus ride from Santiago... we could *maybe* make it work.”

Archer clasps her hands together excitedly, leaning over to pull her laptop out of her bag.

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They spend those three in-between days together packing and preparing, learning how to be in each other’s orbit. Archer sleeps on the couch and makes delicious breakfasts in the mornings, decadent dinners at night. “The least I can do,” she says.

This apartment is not made for two people, which is something that feels precarious and vulnerable from the first night. Then again, Indy thinks, lying in her bed, hyper-aware of Archer's presence on the couch on the other side of the wall, Archer knows *everything* about her.

This, too, sends her into a spiral that's gone by morning, when she wakes to the smell of fresh coffee and avocado toast.

They spend long stretches of time in the three days between Archer's arrival and the trip in a push-pull of Indy trying to prod Archer with carefully worded questions and Archer tiptoeing around any real answers, into the wee hours of the morning, over late-night glasses of wine that turn into two or three.

"Tell me more about where we're going," Archer says, the second night. Indy is perched on her bed while Archer flosses, preens in the mirror. They glance at each other in the reflection.

"So, it's this remote little village in Chile. They have all sorts of beautiful indigenous groups, like the Mapuche, the Easter Island folks, all that. Years ago, people started flocking to this offshoot group. Every religion has a flood myth, right?"

"Right."

"In this part of the country, it rains pretty consistently at this certain time of year. Just absolute downpour for months on end. Then, at the end of it all, all these gorgeous, rare flowers bloom for the rest of the year. So, they have a month-long pilgrimage that celebrates those flowers, rebirth, all that. They follow the rain. They have a goddess for each flower and their leader is like, one of those flower goddesses reincarnated. Something like that. So, I thought, why not frame my experiences so far within the context of this pilgrimage? It's a great setting, and it's very *Eat Pray Love*-ish, but specific to me."

"That's so beautiful," Archer says, dreamily.

"Isn't it?"

A familiar spare key turns in the lock: Sybil. Indy had texted her in a panic once Archer had fallen asleep, mid-sentence, bare hands splayed above her head. Her phone's near-immediate buzz: *I'll come by in the morning – go back to bed*, followed by three heart emojis.

"Hey, everyone," she says, brandishing a brown paper bag from behind her back. "Bagels!"

Over breakfast, Archer gives Sybil the rundown. "I'm really grateful you two are letting me travel with you," she says, to Sybil's wide-eyed surprise.

"Oh?" She says. "That's news to me."

"Well, we have reason to believe she's in danger," Indy says. "Don't we, Sybil?"

Sybil sighs. “Oh god. Okay.” She slides her phone across the counter to Archer. “We saw a man on the compound. He didn’t look like he was supposed to be there. The Council was meeting with him without you. I got a crappy recording. I don’t know if that has to do with why you’re here, but it might be worth a listen.”

Archer holds the speaker up to her ear, nodding and wincing in turn. Indy starts to ask questions, and Archer holds up a finger to quiet. “Sorry,” she mouths. “Hold on.” When she finishes, she sighs deeply, handing Sybil’s phone back. “If my suspicions are right, I think I know who this is. And I think you’ll be able to see a huge part of why I left.” Archer slides her phone out of her pocket, scrolling through her camera roll with her eyes squinted in concentration. Indy and Sybil peer across the table at the same time, just before Archer lays it down flat.

“Was it him?”

It’s a glossy, arms-linked photo from a formal event. The date at the top of the screen is marked from less than a year ago. It’s Archer, in a floor-length black gown with gloves to match, and Tess, in a bright red, standing on either side of the man they’d seen through the window. Archer’s smile is soft, demure; the other two are grinning with teeth, with the man’s hand curled around Tess’ waist.

Sybil nods. “That’s the guy.”

“Take a look at his cufflinks.”

Sybil scoops the phone in her hands, holding it up close to her face. She zooms in. She gasps, and drops the phone on the counter, clattering against the marble.

Indy picks it up in the same instant. Her face falls. Embossed in gold against black, his cufflinks bear the same, unmistakable *K* once carved into her dresser. She hands the phone back to Archer, folding in on herself.

“Yeah,” Archer says, sighing. “That’s how I feel, too.”

“I don’t recognize him,” Indy says. “That’s the weirdest part. I probably knew the face of everyone in that group at some point.”

“That’s the point,” Archer replies. “He’s a fresh face. Now that they’ve been forced underground, he’s their way back up.”

Indy and Sybil nod in silence again.

“It’s a lot to take in,” Indy says.

Sybil, in the clever, quick-witted way she always does, picks up the conversation where Indy trails off. “This must be pretty serious. You had to leave your vision behind. Your livelihood.”

Archer sighs, nods, puts her head in her hands. “It was surprisingly easy to leave behind. Whatever enlightenment bullshit we were selling, I don’t think I’m going to find it there. Not anymore.”

Indy and Sybil nod in sync again.

“I’m ready for anything else at this point,” Archer says, wistfully, resting her cheek on her balled-up hand.

They flutter about the apartment for the rest of the day, double and triple-checking their lists, carefully weighing their baggage, strewing rejected clothes on the backs of chairs. Take-out Thai is called in at one point, boxes passed between them on the floor surrounding Indy’s coffee table.

Sybil falls asleep just after nine, face-down on Indy’s bed, fully clothed. The other two are soon to follow, and, oddly, are the first to rise.

Indy stumbles out of her room at a bright, hazy six-fifteen a.m. to Archer folding the couch back in, the coffeemaker already running. They smile a wordless hello, Indy giving Archer a small salute, which makes her laugh. Before long, they’re perched on opposite ends of the couch, hands cradling identical mugs of creamy coffee.

Once again, suddenly, Indy’s brought back to when they were two strangers in that wide, white room, in the bizarre, wonderful pocket of a mid-day lunch break, brought together by an unnamable, unshakeable fate.

“Look at us, huh?” Indy says. “From television sensations to runaways.”

Archer laughs again, her head thrown back. She leans over and raises her mug to clink it against Indy’s. “I’ll drink to that.”

They sit in silence for a few moments, letting out occasional *mmms* as they find their way to the bottom of their lattes.

Sybil, the great interrupter, the great unifier, glowing from nine hours of sleep, bursts out of Indy’s room. She’s fully dressed, suitcase rolling by her side, Indy’s bed made to perfection behind her. Indy and Archer share a knowing nod: this moment, this brief reprieve, this brief rest before falling feetfirst into the unknown, is over. All they can do is crowd their cups into the sink, call the Lyft, relish in these last few moments on familiar soil.

“Ready?” Sybil asks.

Calista Ginn

Thesis: Craft Essay

March 8, 2021

### Crafting a Cult: Character in *Hand in Glove*

Creating character with intention is centrally important to the art of fiction. While working with a fantastical story, it was important to me that my characters were grounded in being deeply human and deeply flawed. What makes a character so compelling-- revered, feared, or somewhere in-between-- is these rich complexities and precise motivations. “The actor says to the director, ‘what’s my motivation?’ Your characters ask the same of you,” (21) Benjamin Percy states in *Thrill Me: Essays on Fiction*. While writing my thesis, I looked to several models of other novels to focus on how to develop deeply motivated and complex characters.

Within the art of character, there are several techniques authors utilize to illuminate who the character is and what drives them forward. One shining example of character is Arthur Less, the protagonist of *Less* by Andrew Sean Greer. Greer shows us this push-pull between self-assuredness and loneliness, independence and introversion, Less’ unique gift of being able to “exit a room while remaining inside it” (Greer 38) through these specific techniques. This particular passage details Less’ actions, as well as his appearance:

No one could rival Arthur Less for his ability to exit a room while remaining inside it. He sat, and his mind immediately left me behind. His lean frame in pegged jeans and a big speckled white cable-knit sweater, his long flushed neck stretched as he listened-- “so *lonely, so lonely*”-- too big a head for his frame, in a way, too long and rectangular, lips too red, cheeks too rosy, and a thick glossy head of blond hair buzzed short on the sides

and falling in a wave over his forehead. Staring off at the fog, hands in his lap, and mouthing along to the lyrics-- so *lonely*, so *lonely*-- I blush to think of the tangle of lines I made of him. (Greer 38)

We glean a few important attributes of Less through the physical description in this passage, namely Less' nervous tendency to disappear into a world of his own, as well as his long, lean, lanky frame. Throughout the novel, Less is driven forward by this endearing awkwardness, figuring out what to do next as a writer who feels he has lost his purpose after a deeply upsetting heartbreak. In terms of Less' interior world, Less is nudged towards adventure by his preoccupation with youth. For example, his thoughts here: "Arthur Less is the first homosexual ever to grow old. That is, at least, how he feels at times like these" (Greer 34). While Less is a nervous wreck, yes, he also has shades of adventure-seeking independence, and an unwavering stubbornness. These intricacies, as revealed by Greer's deliberate techniques, drive him to accept a number of international invitations in order to avoid attending an ex's wedding, allowing the dynamic plot-- and Less' subsequent growth-- to unfold.

Indy, the protagonist of my thesis, is a complicated woman, as any person who gets paid to immerse herself in cults for a living should be. She is deeply inquisitive, caring, creative, and daring; at the same time, she's a nervous wreck, she indulges in escapism. She continually pushes the envelope; in turn, she's all-too-willing to put herself in danger if it means showcasing a good story. She's so, *so* impulsive, and very jilted, but simultaneously too trusting. Indy's character mirrors the tradition of quirky TV hosts before her: David Farrier from *Dark Tourist* and the late, great Anthony Bourdain. She loves to push boundaries, even if they come back to bite her soft-hearted self. More than anything, she loves studying the phenomenon of belonging, as we all do, and her arc is all about figuring out where *she* belongs again, after the wild, weird

profession she loves scorns her. Her layers give way to stakes and urgency, and “no stakes and no urgency makes a stillborn story” (Percy 22). Like *Less*, her shades of intricacy propel her forward.

Although the story is not from her perspective for the purpose of this excerpt, I want to touch on Archer, our cult leader. For the future of this novel, as the unlikely trio embarks on their future journey, I see the perspective shifting to her. Every famous cult has their *thing*: Jim Jones’ aviators, Charles Manson’s scraggly beard, the red uniforms of the Rajneeshpuram. Archer’s *thing* is her healing hands, decked in a rotating array of fancy gloves. I thought this would serve as an interesting motif because it’s unexpected and a little old-fashioned-- gloves evoke an image of cotillions, balls, vintage pairs worn while driving 40’s Cadillacs. It’s something immediately unconventional that doesn’t feel gimmicky-- it feels glamorous and elusive. This mythos of her “healing hands” also calls in the traditional acts of femininity-- the actions of nurturing, healing, holding. This contrasts with the traditional attributes of a cult leader-- manipulative, masculine, menacing-- and gives her shades of depth. Additionally, with the gloves, we get a glimpse into the private vs. public image of Archer as a cult leader. Gloves on: she’s self-assured, running an empire, managing a web of secrets. In the rare moments where her gloves are off, we see someone more vulnerable, more reserved. Female cult leaders are rare, and the way they move about this leadership structure is different to their male counterparts-- creating Archer meant sketching her with this in mind.

Dialogue is another vitally important character technique, and I really wanted to get the dialogue between these two major characters right. Their back-and-forth drives much of the story forward. I made a choice to include snippets of their interviews in a “transcript” format to really isolate their dialogue and emphasize this back-and-forth, and to show how quick-witted Indy is



in her job as a T.V. host. Their dialogue discloses important details about both characters, not only in their interviews, but in the moments they have alone outside of filming Indy's T.V. show. Despite coming from wildly different backgrounds, I wanted their dialogue to express how they are intellectual equals, able to find common ground despite their differences. A small example is when Indy, sitting across from Archer and admiring her bare hands, says "sorry I'm weirdly touching you," to which Archer immediately replies, "sorry I weirdly interrupted our interview." Using a piece of dialogue like this, in which they mirror each other's speech patterns, can clue the reader in to the nature of their parallel lives as characters.

While creating character, the element of perspective is another determining factor to how the story will unfold. We have our complex character, richly rendered, ready for action; from there, we must decide the best vantage point to view their story. Perspective largely dictates how the authorial interpretation of a character will be structured, which is another important tool of building character. I initially chose to write *Hand in Glove* in a third-person style simply because it felt most natural, but this process has forced me to dig into *why* this worked best for my story. While my characters' journeys are very introspective and internal, I felt that first-person would not work well for the purpose of this story, and that my broader judgements on characters were better revealed through third-person perspective. Third person has authority: it allows us to get a handle on both the external and the internal, without the overly personal filter of first person. Third person grounds us more in the action of what's going on. In short, there is so much going on in these characters' external surroundings that it felt limiting to choose first person.

One example of how third person can serve creation of character is in the introduction to *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche. In this passage, she clues us into the perspective of Ifemelu, one of the story's two protagonists.

Princeton, in the summer, smelled of nothing, and although Ifemelu liked the tranquil greenness of the many trees, the clean streets and stately homes, the delicately overpriced shops, and the quiet, abiding air of earned grace, it was this, the lack of a smell, that most appealed to her, perhaps because the other American cities she knew well had all smelled distinctly. Philadelphia had the musty scent of history. New Haven smelled of neglect. Baltimore smelled of brine, and Brooklyn of sun-warmed garbage. But Princeton had no smell. She liked taking deep breaths here. She liked watching the locals who drove with pointed courtesy and parked their latest-model cars outside the organic grocery store on Nassau Street or outside the sushi restaurants or outside the ice cream shop that had fifty different flavors including red pepper or outside the post office where effusive staff bounded out to greet them at the entrance. She liked the campus, grave with knowledge, the Gothic buildings with their vine-laced walls, and the way everything transformed, in the half-light of night, into a ghostly scene. She liked, most of all, that in this place of affluent ease, she could pretend to be someone else, someone specially admitted into a hallowed American club, someone adorned with certainty. (1)

Adichie grounds us beautifully in place here, but distinctly through Ifemelu's unique experience. As a Nigerian immigrant navigating the world of academia, the American landscape has vastly shaped Ifemelu's interior, and as we get a map of where she's been, we get an insight into her *mental* map, her distinct imposter syndrome. We are able to zoom in and out of her exterior and interior worlds, giving a broader perspective. "Ultimately, someone has to take charge," states Christopher Castellani in *The Art of Perspective* (8). Crowning this third-person narrator among a cast of characters is a pivotal choice; that narrator will "compel us to tell it his

way, with his frames of reference, his agenda and lexicon and baggage, within his particular wedge of time” (Castellani 8). Adichie sets up Ifemelu’s particular narrative lens masterfully.

Admittedly, it was difficult at first to figure out *whose* perspective fit best for this excerpt of my novel. Archer is a sparkly, fiery-haired enigma. She’s a cult leader-- her whole M.O. is being captivating. As I wrote my first draft, I wanted to hover back and forth between her and Indy because she’s just so *fun* to write and to look at, but that made for a messy narrative. As I revised and received feedback, it became clear: this first bit of the book is undoubtedly Indy’s story. With that goal in mind came the journey of pinpointing how third person would best contribute to telling her story, and when to flit in and out of her internal happenings. Indy is a T.V. host, after all, so her entire career relies on being watched. Everyone has a way they act privately vs. publicly, but this difference is especially pronounced for someone who works in entertainment, whose public persona is tied to their popularity and livelihood. I particularly wanted to draw attention to the contrast between the exterior Indy (brave, dauntless) and the interior Indy (nervous, impulsive). She is best equipped to tell this story because of her sharp observational skills, her willingness to dive into the weird and wonderful, and her rich interior responses to her career lows (her stalking) and highs (her comeback, meeting Archer). Through third person perspective, the full scope of all these attributes, of the complexities of Indy’s character, are able to be explored.

Coming from the perspective of a writer in the political field, ideas of likability, social status, and political ties were deeply entwined with my character choices. My cast of characters is nearly all-female, which comes with a unique set of social expectations. The complexities of female characters can often be unfairly conflated with their likability. In her book *Inside Story*, Dara Marks says “when it comes to drama, likeability is about as important as hair color” (19).

When writing fiction, it's easy to feel an attachment to the characters one has created, but that sense of attachment or pride shouldn't absolve those characters from being flawed or amoral people. Building characters out of thin air is hard, but making them complex makes for a richer, more colorful story-- one that doesn't rely on lazy heroic tropes.

For example, Amy Dunne from *Gone Girl* is not morally good or "likeable" by any means, but because of author Gillian Flynn's masterful insight into the emotions behind Amy framing her husband for murder, along with the deceptive twist that turns her from innocent to cunning, her unlikability transforms her into the enticing, delightful "love-to-hate" star of the story. Knowing that I was working with nearly all women, the dimension of likability was constantly at the forefront of my mind. Author Roxane Gay articulates the complicated politics of likability in her essay "Not Here To Make Friends". She states that writers are often inundated with criticism about characters' likability as if it is "directly proportional to the quality of a novel's writing", which is "particularly true for women in fiction". "In literature as in life," Gay states, "the rules are all too often different for girls." Deciding to write a mostly-female cast of characters means dealing with the social, cultural, and political implications of what it means to move through society as a woman. The women of this story hold multitudes, and their merit as characters should not be tied to a prescribed notion of femininity.

Ultimately, the process of writing my thesis has been made richer by intense study of character. A writer cannot rely on imagination and willpower alone: building a solid foundation of craft knowledge leads to a stronger, tighter narrative strategy. "If perspective is a way of seeing, and narration is perspective in action, then a narrative strategy is the how and why of that seeing" (16), states Castellani. Analyzing the *how* and *why* of what makes this story tick through the lens of craft and character has helped me to manage those moving parts in a clearer and more

pointed way. Through the arduous, rewarding process of revision, I have not only built the beginning of a manuscript I'm very proud of, but I have also added numerous skills to my writing toolbox that I will be able to carry with me beyond my Belmont education.

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