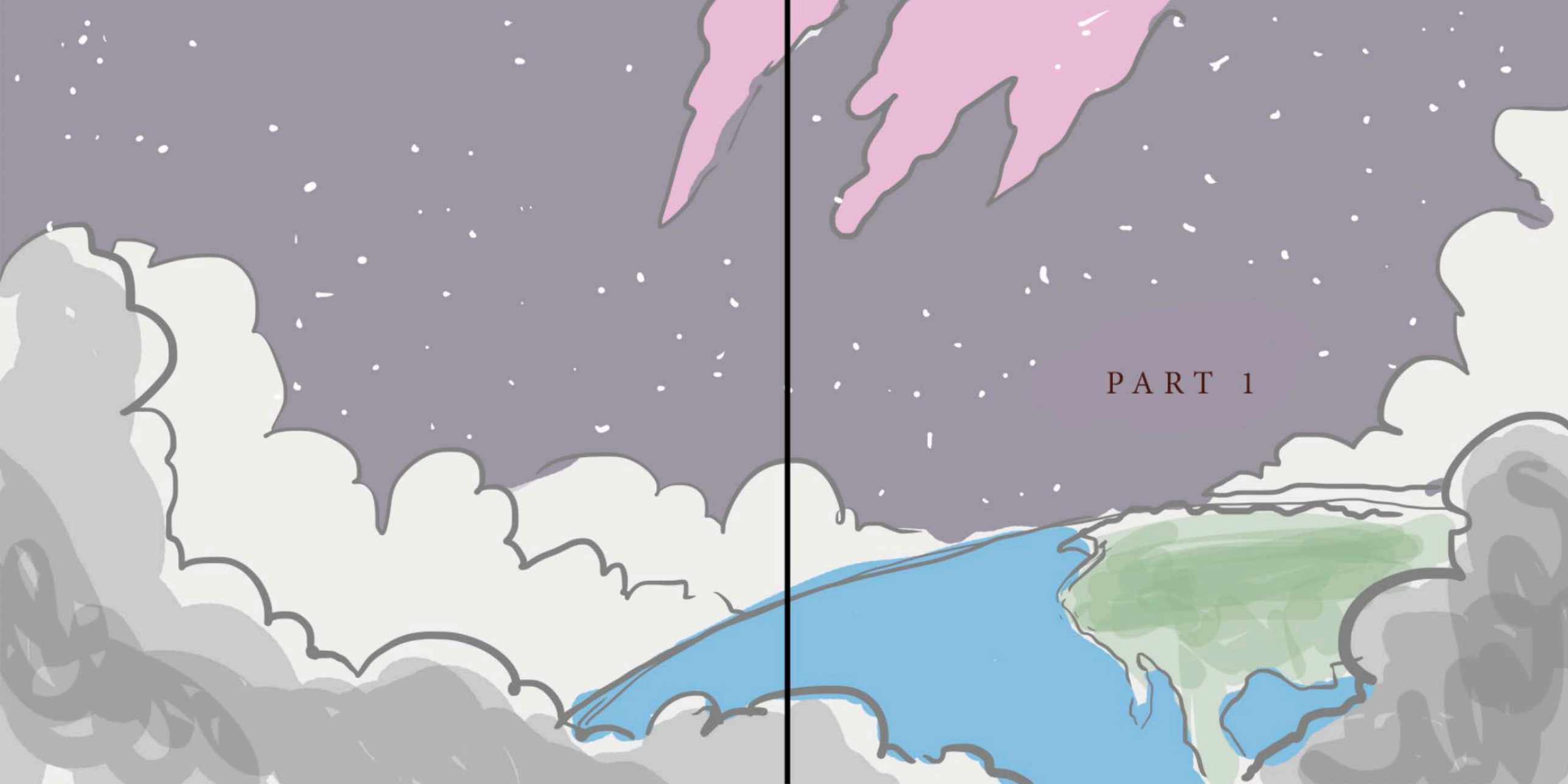

PART 1

In the peaceful silence of their happy place in Heaven, Mara and Alard sat hand in hand on a bench among the lush greenery. Today, however, was special. They were expecting a beloved guest to join them. The Divine Being had requested their presence, asking them to meet with him.

There was something important to be discussed.

"Hello Mara, Alard."

They heard a deep masculine voice behind them. They both turned to see an old man with long flowing white hair, a beard, and brilliant white robes. They smiled appreciating the form the Divine Being chose to present to them.

"We are honored by your presence," Mara said standing and giving a small bow. Alard, a man of few words, followed in suit, murmuring his agreement.

"I hope you still feel that way once I have said my piece," The Divine Being said, his voice soft and full of sadness. He did not enjoy giving news like this to those who were able to find love in Heaven. The two of them waited anxiously for him to impart his words.

"It saddens me to be the bearer of this news, but the two of you must soon separate. Your earthly bodies are being prepared as we speak."

"Are our bodies not close to each other?" Alard asked. The Divine Being observed them with remorse in his eyes.

"Don't worry Alard," Mara said turning to him and smiling. "We will just have to find one another again, no matter how many lifetimes we endure." The Divine Being smiled to himself. Mara was ever the optimistic one.

"Is that possible?" Alard directed his question to the old man.

"Indeed. However, it may take many lifetimes. Once the two of you have found each other and lived a fulfilling life, you will be able to return to Heaven and live out eternity together."

Alard and Mara nodded to each other. Then turned back to the old man. "How much time do we have?"

"Not much, I'm afraid. Mara, it is your turn now." The Divine Being held out his hand to her. Mara nodded again and turned to Alard.

"We will meet again. Until then remember my love for you. Let it guide you through each incarnation until we meet." Mara kissed Alard and took the Divine Being's hand, ready to face the next challenge.

Mara had been faced with many incarnations since leaving Heaven, each with its own hardships and triumphs. She floated, her soul invisible in its current form, on the earthly plane, waiting to be called to its next life. Though she had lived several lives she had yet to find a fulfilling life with Alard. In some lives she never met him at all. In others she met him only in passing not recognizing him until she looked back on her life after her death. Mara could barely remember Heaven or the times she had spent with Alard there. They were out of focus. She only knew that her soul searched for its missing piece and cried out in frustration and pain as glimpses of her past lives flowed through her mind, and she realized that she had been unable to recognize Alard in all of them.

Flash!

55,000 BCE

Mara was born in a cave as a homo sapiens when humans had just evolved. She had grown up searching for something more her whole life. Her clan had warred with another clan of humans though they were a different species known as Neanderthals.

They had captured a male of the opposite species and kept him as a prisoner. It had been Mara's job to care for him. She felt drawn to him, and treated him with compassion. His clan had come for him and she had never seen him again.

Flash!

54 BCE

Mara had been born a princess in the Persian Empire. She had lived a life of luxury with no shortage of suitors. Then the Roman's had invaded and taken her prisoner. She had been part of a group that was to be taken back to the capital of the Roman Empire and sold as slaves. One soldier had shown her a kindness that none of the others did. She had died on the journey back, unused to exposure to the elements and the physical fortitude necessary for such a journey.

Flash!

920 AD

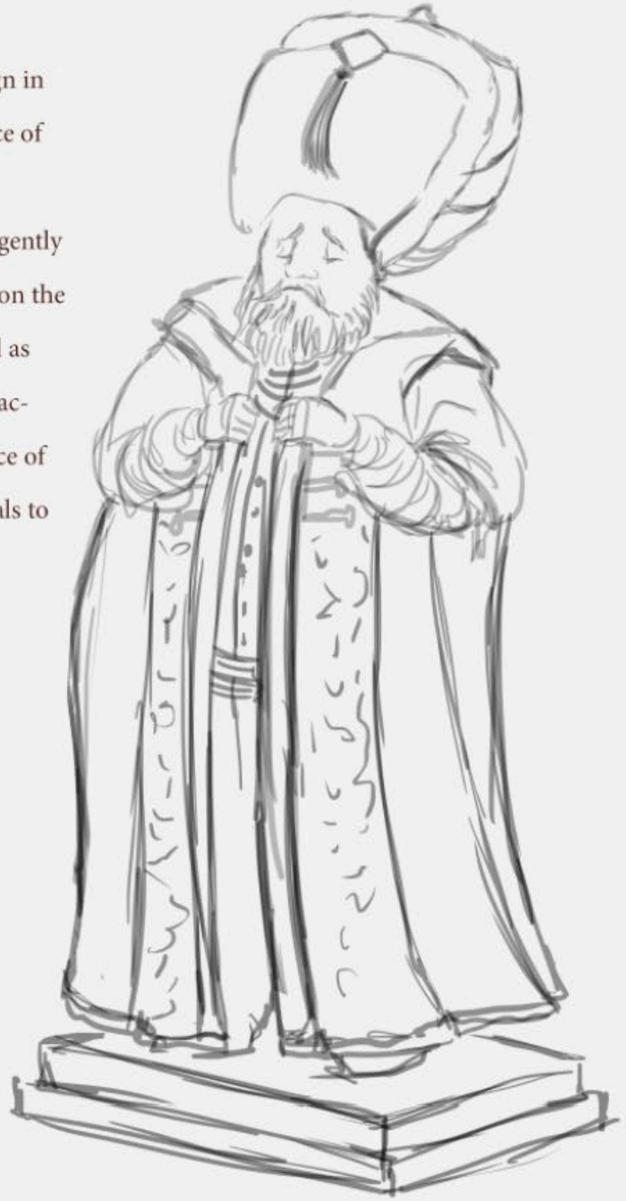
Mara was born as Celt on the coast of an ocean in the north. She grew up, married, and had children. One day a Viking party raided her small village, taking the women and children captive, and burning the village to the ground. One Viking male had found her hiding, stricken with grief over the death of her husband and the capturing of her children. He had been alone, combing the village for any valuables that might have been missed during the commotion, and for her something about him seemed familiar. He commanded her to run and despite what her instincts were telling, she fled.

The memories of her previous lives went on and on. Still Mara searched for Alard in spirit until she was called again to an earthly host.

PART 2

1513 AD

Upon returning from his recent war campaign in eastern Europe, aiding in expanding the influence of the Ottoman Empire, Alard knelt in front of the Sultan. Born a warrior slave, he had worked diligently through the military ranks. With much success on the war front, he had gained the Sultan's trust as well as the honor to be in his presence. The Sultan had acknowledged his successes by making him a Prince of the Empire, giving him his own army and generals to command.



"You have done well Alard" the Sultan praised him. "Have you any plans for another successful war in the near future?"

"Yes, your Majesty. I am following a few leads I found while I was abroad."

"Very well. You may go. I look forward to the spoils of another successful campaign."

Alard bowed his head to the sultan, his long dark hair falling around his shoulders. He stood, bowed again, and turned on his heel. He had much to think about.

* * *

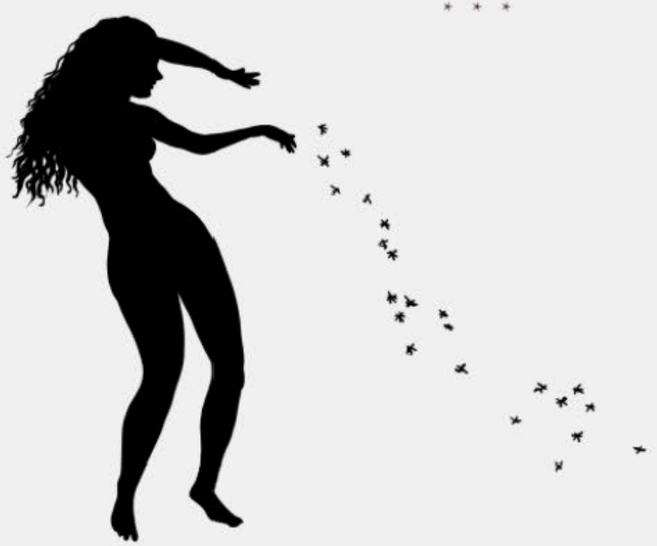
Alard entered his apartment at the Palace, happy to be home. He stripped off his armor until he stood only in his simple dimije. He stretched his muscular, olive-skinned physique out on the pluch, elegantly designed Turkish rug in front of his bed.

Rolling onto his stomach and resting his chin on his forearms, he began to mull over the rumors he had heard of a traveling gypsy group, renowned for their metallurgy and magic.

Alard's army could use new artillery of greater caliber and he was sure he could persuade the Sultan to concur. What he was most interested in, however, was their magic. He had heard that there was one more beautiful and more powerful than the rest . It was said she gifted in the ways of curses and could tell the future, which meant she might prove useful in more ways than one.

Alard resolved to have a summons sent to this group, with the request for a sword tailored specifically for him. He would request that the woman, Mara was her name, be the one to meet with him. His weariness caught up to him as he lay stretched out on the rug. He slept and dreamt of Mara, though he couldn't remember when he awoke.

* * *



Mara's family was currently camped outside of the capital of the Empire. Gypsy's all around the continent had been captured and forced into slavery. They were hoping to trade thier metallurgy for their freedom. Sitting at the dressing table in her tent, Mara stared absentmindedly at her reflection in the mirror. She had smooth olive skin, and her raven hair cascaded in messy waves over her shoulders and down her back. Her chocolate brown eyes were bright and accentuated with gold shadow and black liner. She was wearing her best skirt, a bright orange color with red and gold accents in the designs and layers. Her blouse was the same color of orange and was wrapped in a vest corset, with bell sleeves. Her grandmother had made the ensemble for her a few years ago, before she died. It wasn't the only thing her grandmother had left her. Her grandmother had taught her how to use the powers she possessed. She was much stronger at magic than the other women in her family. She fixed a gold chain head dress to her hair, the thin gold chain tailing down her back. She was ready.

Mara had been sent an invitation specifically to meet with a Prince of the Empire. He had requested a special sword and she was to take his measurements for it. Her family had hopes that this would be their ticket to freedom within the Empire. Satisfied with herself, she left her tent to meet the escort that had been sent for her by the Prince himself.

* * *

Alard, dressed in his best dimiji and vest, awaiting Mara's arrival in his apartment. He had requested the presence of his highest general to help him get a feel for the gypsy woman as gypsies were known to be tricksters. The lieutenant he had sent to collect the woman entered and announced her arrival. She had been sent with an entourage of her own consisiting of her two eldest brothers.

As Mara entered, flanked by her brothers, Alard felt a strange stirring in himself. He couldn't quite grasp what it was. It wasn't lust exactly, though she was indeed as beautiful as the rumors had made her out to be. Her dark eyes met his and he swallowed hard. His throat felt dry. He watched as she curtsied gracefully to him, bowing her head.

Alard collected himself as best he could. "My name is Alard. I am pleased to meet you. Though I summoned you to make my sword, there is another reason I have asked you here. I know that your family is looking for freedom. If you will consent to use your powers to help me with my next war campaign, I will grant it."

* * *

Mara took a sharp breath. She had felt that there was more to this meeting than just the sword. In an effort to protect her from the unforeseen her brothers moved closer to her side. She looked at the Prince, and felt a familiarity to him. She felt as if she knew him well, though it wasn't possible. He was quite handsome and his eyes spoke to her deepest desires.

"I accept your terms," Mara stated, bowing her head to him as she curtsied once more.

"Before we make the pact, I will need to see a demonstration of your powers," Alard said.

"Of course," Mara said. Her brothers each touched her elbow, questioning whether she was okay. She nodded to each in turn and stepped away from the security they offered towards Alard.

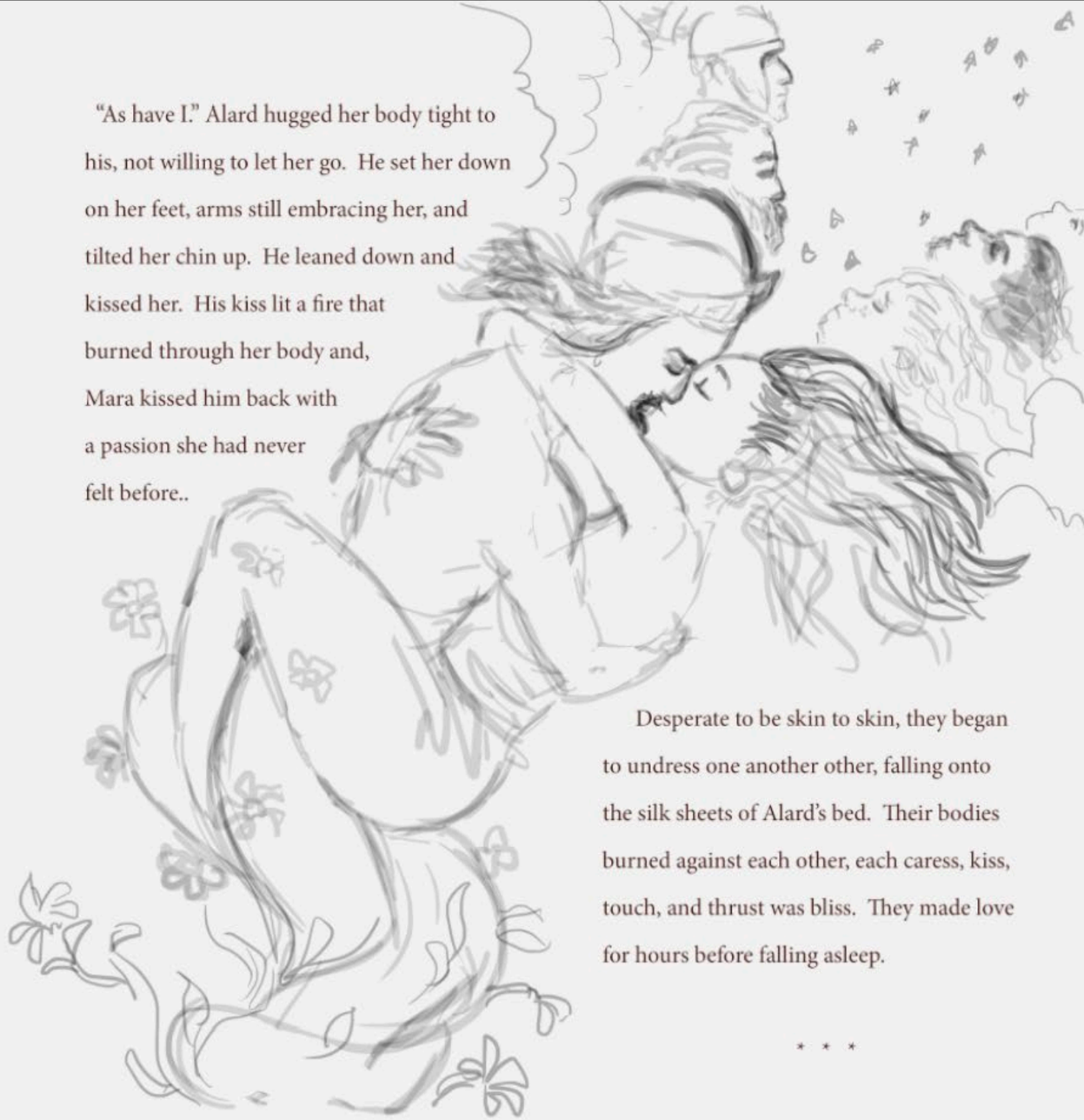
She felt no fear of him as she held out her hand to him. "Shall I read your future?"

Alard nodded, allowing her to take his hand. She turned it over and traced the lines of his palms, opening herself to his energy. A vision wracked her brain of Alard, sitting on a bench among lush greenery next to a raven- hair woman. The woman turned to smile at him and Mara gasped. The woman was her! As the vision faded, she looked into Alard's eyes and saw the recognition within them.

"Leave us," Alard instructed his guards. They obeyed him, marching Mara's protesting brothers out with them.

When they were alone, Mara jumped into Alard's arms. "Oh my love, I have been searching for you for an eternity!"

"As have I." Alard hugged her body tight to his, not willing to let her go. He set her down on her feet, arms still embracing her, and tilted her chin up. He leaned down and kissed her. His kiss lit a fire that burned through her body and, Mara kissed him back with a passion she had never felt before..



Desperate to be skin to skin, they began to undress one another other, falling onto the silk sheets of Alard's bed. Their bodies burned against each other, each caress, kiss, touch, and thrust was bliss. They made love for hours before falling asleep.

* * *

Mara awoke, cocooned in warmth and feeling loved. She felt herself glowing as she smiled, snuggling into Alard's body heat. He sighed in his sleep and pulled her closer to him. As she lay there, a sense of time began to creep back into her reality. She had been in Alard's room alone for hours…. What must her brothers be thinking? She shook Alard awake and told him she needed to go to her brothers. Alard begged her to stay, but the customs of the time dictated that she must leave. Remembering the sword measurements she was supposed to have taken, she pulled a measuring tape from a pocket in her skirt and coaxed Alard out of bed. "I promise to make you the best and most beautiful sword you have ever seen," Mara said kissing him.

"As long as you return to give it to me, I don't care what it looks like," Alard laughed, his voice deep and husky with sleep.

"My powers are also yours to do as you will," Mara said, looking into his dark eyes, trusting him.

"Mara, your family's freedom is guaranteed. You don't owe me anything," Alard said, tilting her head back and returning her gaze.

"I know that, Alard. But I have already searched too long for you, to lose you. If it means protecting you, I would use my very body as a shield for you," Mara claimed, smiling at him.

"Thank you…but that won't be necessary. I could never allow you to sacrifice yourself for me. That is my job," Alard said, embracing her tightly. He kissed her again, lingering over her lips. "Just come back to me as soon as you can." With that he released her, knowing she had to return to her family.

* * *

Mara had returned to her brothers who had been pacing the corridor outside Alard's room. She reassured them that everything was fine and that their family's safety was assured. They rode their horses swiftly back to camp to begin preparations for the sword. Mara found her father, and began to explain the measurements and what the sword should look like. Once that errand was finished, she went back to her tent.

Mara's grandmother had had a premonition that the family's freedom and well-being might depend on Mara's skill and ability with the gifts she had been blessed with. Mara's gift of visions was strong, rivaled only by her gift for creating potions. Mara set to work, preparing the ingredients for potions that she thought could help Alard in his war campaign. She created healing potions for wounds, and cursed potions that would act as a poison to their targets. These cursed potions could be activated by dipping heads of arrows, swords, and daggers in them and piercing the flesh of enemies.

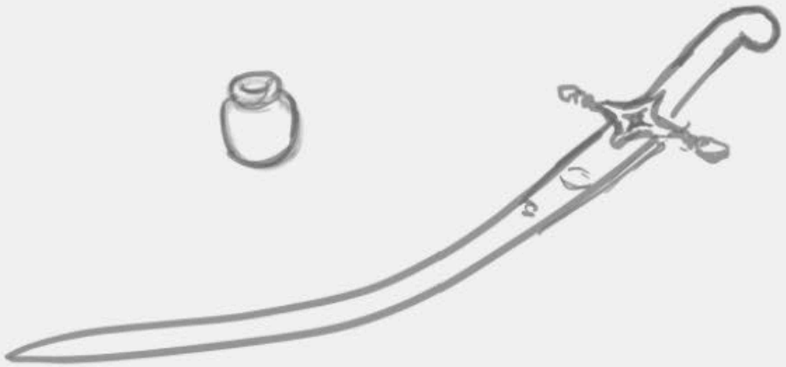
In the days that followed Mara and Alard's reconnecting, they stole as much time together as possible. Alard called on Mara often, claiming he had need of her gifts for visions in planning his campaign. Mara snuck off to meet Alard at every opportunity and as such, he showed he the beauty of the Empire. As much time as they spent together outside in the public, they spent more alone in Alard's apartment, learning all they could about one another both physically and emotionally. Mara helped Alard unlock his memories of previous lives and they discussed them at length, especially the lives they had crossed paths in, but not recognized each other.

On the eve of the night Mara was to deliver the sword to Alard, he gave her the devastating news that the Sultan had ordered that he undertake another campaign right away, once he had received the sword. Mara was heartbroken. She had returned to her tent, knowing that she had one final gift to give her love, other than the sword. She set about making the preparations in secret for a potent potion. One that would protect Alard at all costs.

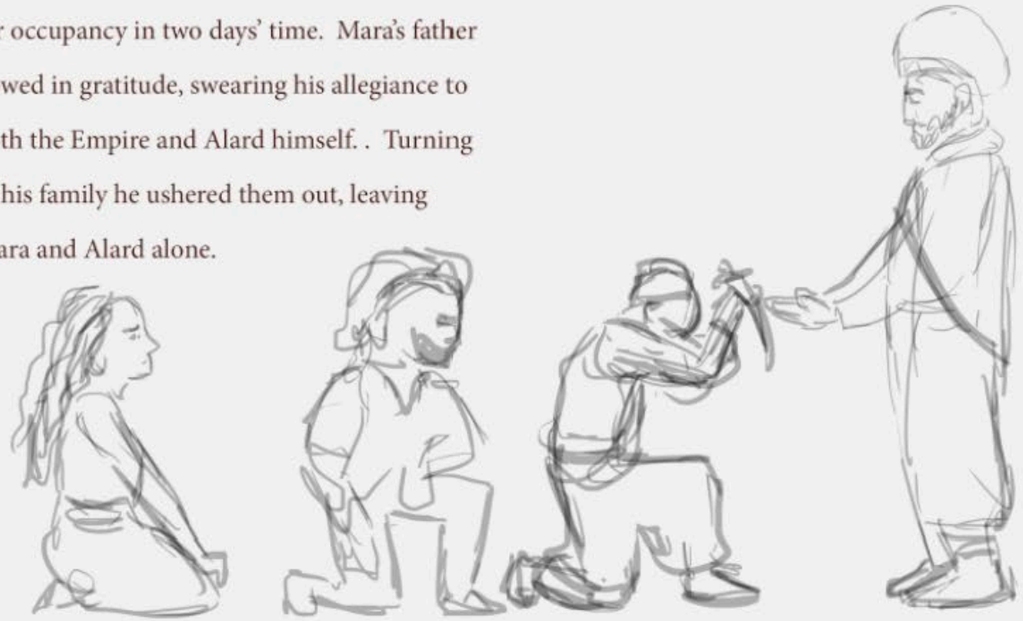
Mara's father delivered Alard's sword to her, as beautiful as she had designed. The blade was honed to a sharp edge that could draw blood from the lightest touch. The hilt was gold and encrusted with precious gems. Mara took the sword from her father, and dismissed him, telling him she would be ready in half an hour to gift the sword to Alard. She had prepared a spell for the blade, that it would be swift and true and conquer Alard's enemies. Sheathing the sword, she laid it aside to finish the potion.

Mara set the potion on the dressing table, and took a dagger, slicing a narrow cut across her left breast, close to her heart. She let the blood dribble down into the vial. She then said an incantation, passing her hand over the cut, and healing it. Armed with the potion and the sword, she set out for Alard's apartment.

* * *



Alard waited for Mara to return with his sword. He vowed he would return to her, and marry her. Mara arrived with an entourage of her people, including her brothers as well as her mother and father this time. The sword was presented to him and it was indeed as beautiful as Mara had claimed it would be. He swore his oath to her father that his family was safe from slavery. He had arranged a shop for them to make weapons in that would be ready for occupancy in two days' time. Mara's father bowed in gratitude, swearing his allegiance to both the Empire and Alard himself. . Turning to his family he ushered them out, leaving Mara and Alard alone.



"I can't believe you are leaving here tomorrow," Mara said, fighting back tears.

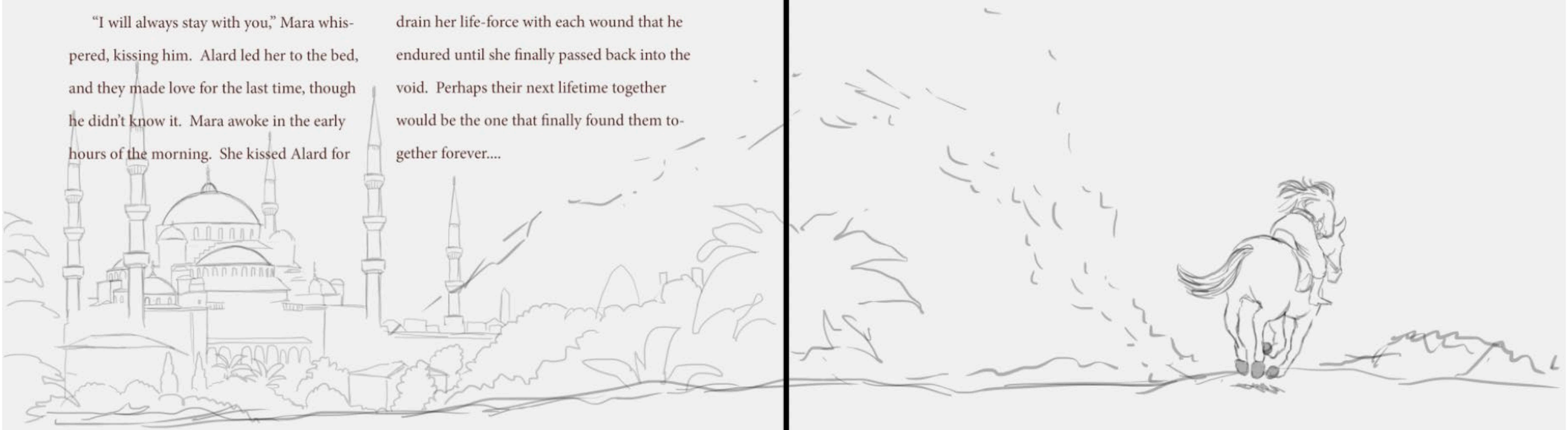
"I'll be home soon; and when I get back, the first thing I'm doing is marrying you," Alard assured her.

"I know you will, but the months apart will be so lonely," Mara said, her voice trembling. "I have one final gift for you. It's a potion that will protect you. You will be invincible with this. But you can't take it until you reach your destination." She held the vial out to him, the contents blood red in the light.

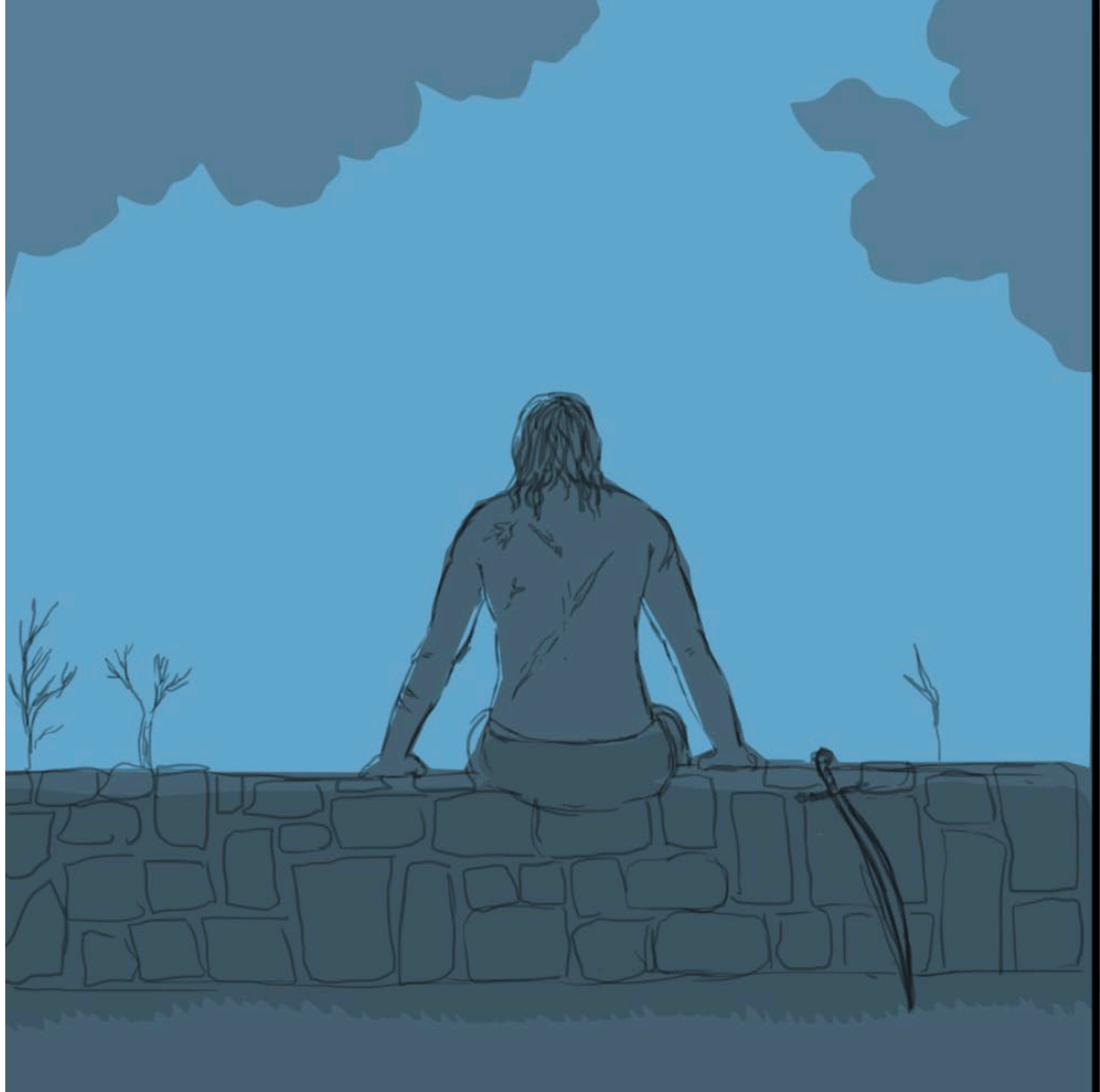
"Thank you, Mara." Alard said, taking the potion from her. "Will you stay with me tonight?" Alard asked her, lifting her face so he could look into her eyes. Tears trickled down her cheeks.

"I will always stay with you," Mara whispered, kissing him. Alard led her to the bed, and they made love for the last time, though he didn't know it. Mara awoke in the early hours of the morning. She kissed Alard for the last time and left him to his preparations. He would be leaving at dawn.

Mara rode her horse recklessly back to her family's camp. Tears streamed down her face. The potion she had given him would slowly drain her life-force with each wound that he endured until she finally passed back into the void. Perhaps their next lifetime together would be the one that finally found them together forever....

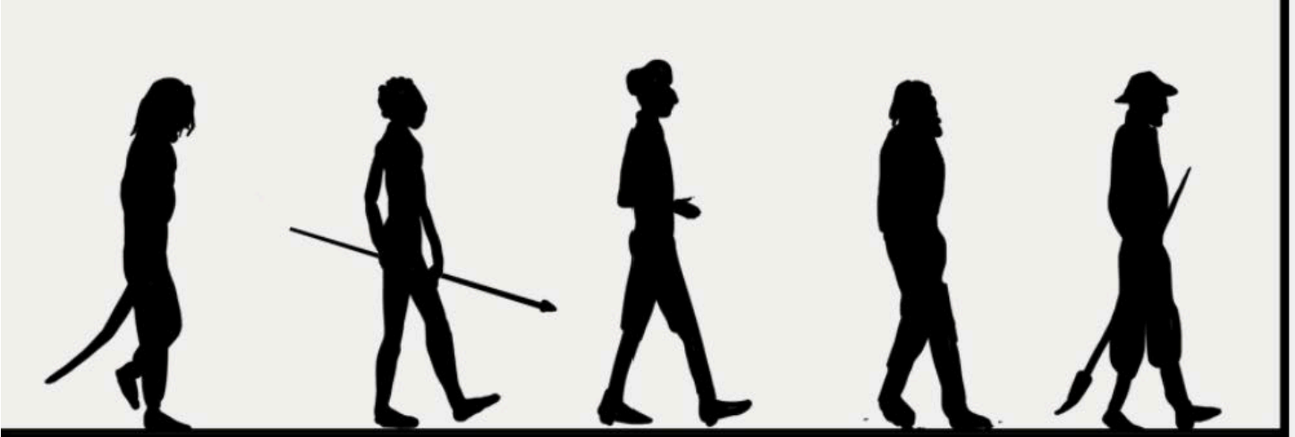



PART 3

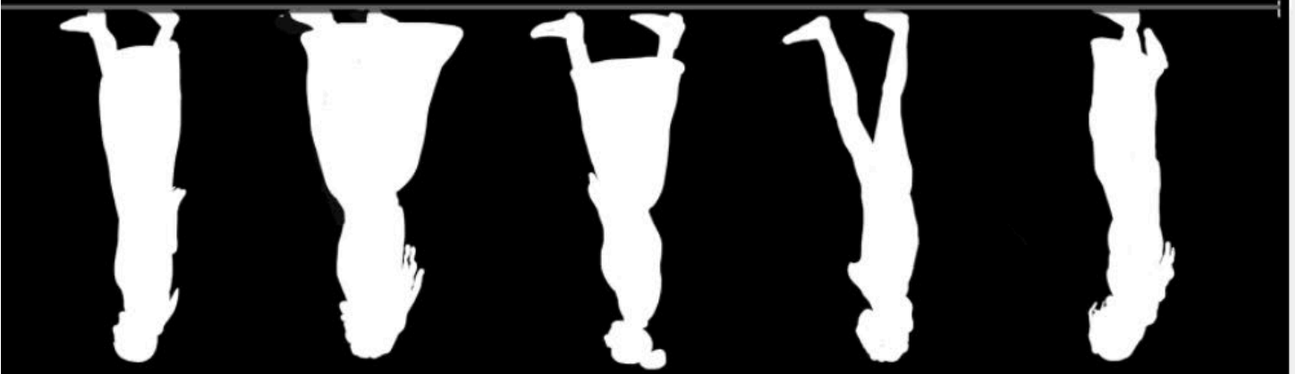


When Alard returned from his war campaign, ready to make Mara his wife he found only a letter that she had written for him. It explained the secret to the potion she had given him and that she had willingly sacrificed her life to keep him safe. Alard had cried out in anguish, and had even considered killing himself. However he didn't want Mara's sacrifice to be in vain, so he vowed to live the rest of his life protecting her family. He succeeded, but was killed in another war campaign a few years later. Mara's family mourned him, thankful for all he had done for them.

* * *



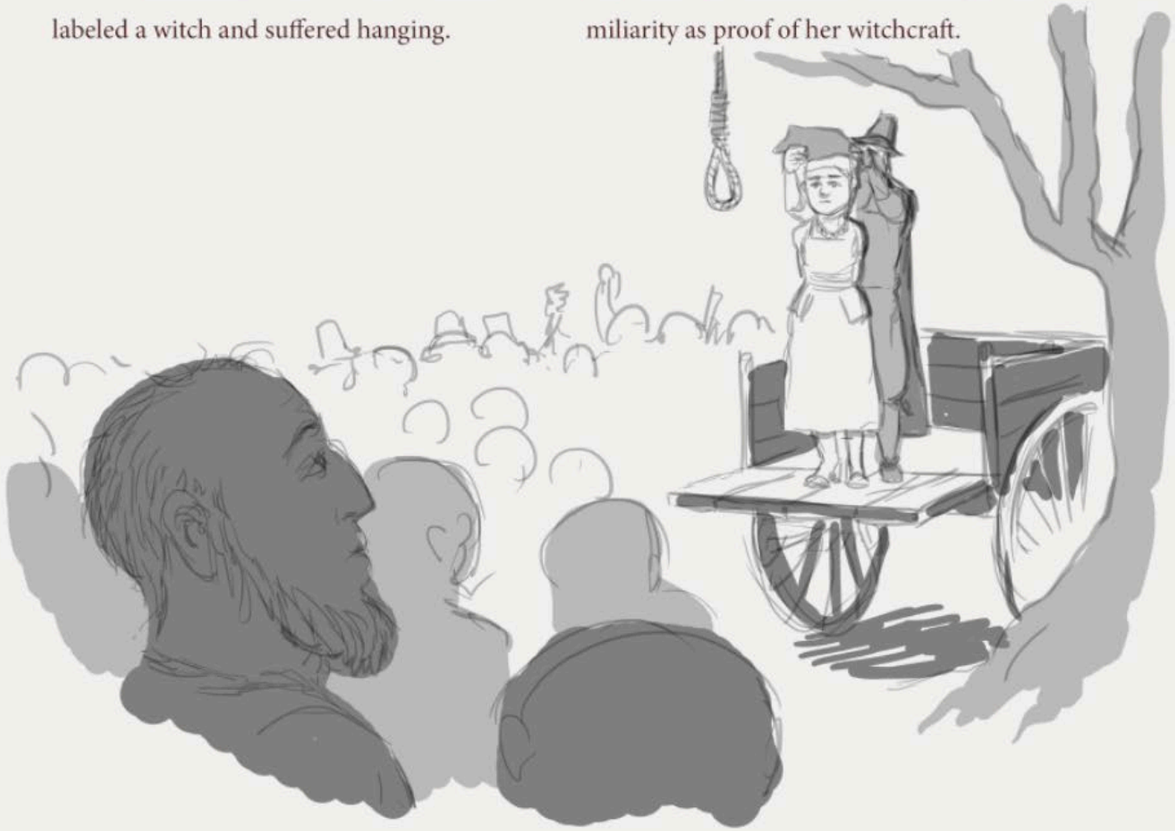
Alard searched in spirit for Mara until he was called to another earthly host. His loneliness grew as he searched, but he never gave up. Having the short time with Mara in his life as a Prince of the Ottoman Empire had given him hope that he would find Mara and the next time they would make it work. As he wandered the earthly plain, memories of his previous lives tumbled through his mind.



Flash!

Alard had been born a Puritan in the New World. He had lived through the Salem Witch Trials in 1693. Mara had arrived in the colony in 1692. She had been labeled a witch and suffered hanging.

Alard had been a spectator in the crowd calling for the execution. Their eyes had met briefly before the hood was pulled over her head. He brushed off the feeling of familiarity as proof of her witchcraft.



Flash!

Alard had been a soldier in the Revolutionary War in 1778. Mara had been a daughter of a prominent general. The two had crossed paths only briefly and he was left feeling as if he had lost something when she was gone. He had been killed in the war later that year.

Flash!

Alard was a soldier in the Confederacy during the Civil War. He had been fighting a battle with a Union Army and had been fatally wounded. He had been moved from the battlefield to a house where a woman had tended his wounds. Mara had been that woman. When he had clutched her hand in his death throes he had felt at peace.

On and on the memories flashed one by one through his head. He grew frustrated with all the lives that he had missed his soulmate in, but he never lost hope. He carried that spark of hope within himself as he searched and was called to another earthly host.

* * *

2019 AD

Alard was a history major in his third year of his bachelor's degree. He checked his watch as he crossed campus, making sure he had enough time to grab a cup of coffee at the café before his next class. He entered the café and waited in line to order. His name was called by a pretty girl he knew. The semester had just started, but they were in a class on Civil War history together. He thought she had said she was an archaeology major. He smiled as he made his way to grab his coffee from her. Their hands touched as she handed him his coffee from behind the counter. Memories of his previous lives came tumbling to the forefront of his mind as he recognized Mara.

Mara smiled, her memories cascading through her mind too. "I was wondering when I would see you again." Mara came around the counter and embraced Alard. Their two hearts were united once again. This time Alard vowed he would not lose her again.

* * *

What do you think about a Starbucks looking coffee shop on the left to visually catch up the reader to current times.
But everything disappears and only they exist on the Right page as they embrace as you have it.

The Divine Being watched the two soul-mates reconnect from his seat near the window of the coffee shop. He was disguised as a college student for the meeting. He had watched their two souls evolve and mature over time. Now they were ready. This was their time.

The End