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## Incongruous: A Creative Rescripting of Black and Afro-Latina Women Healing from CSA and Intergenerational Trauma Through Spirituality

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Incongruous: A Creative *Rescripting* of Black and Afro-Latina Women Healing from CSA and  
Intergenerational Trauma Through Spirituality

by

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Under the Direction of Rosita Scerbo, Ph.D.

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

*Incongruous* is a creative thesis project centered on the intersectional experiences of Black and Afro-Latina women in the aftermath of sexual violence, particularly Child Sexual Abuse (CSA). Through the medium of a screenplay, this fictional narrative explores the transformative potential of spirituality. Grounded in Black Feminist Thought, Chicana Studies, and Critical Film Theory, the project challenges traditional narratives by delving into the intricate dynamics of identity, trauma, and healing. By dissecting media representations and engaging with interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks, *Incongruous* seeks to both deconstruct harmful stereotypes, such as the myth of the Strong Black Woman, and amplify the often-overlooked narratives of child-on-child sexual abuse survivors. In summoning inspiration from Kimberlé Crenshaw's notion of intersectionality and Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of nepantla, *Incongruous* navigates the liminal spaces where identities converge and diverge, offering a platform for introspection, transformation, and ultimately, healing. Thus, this project is created upon the theoretical framework of Intersectional-Nepantla, intentionally bridging the internal and external, the personal and systemic, and recognizing art as theory.

**INDEX WORDS:** Healing, Spirituality, Intersectional-Nepantla, Child Sexual Abuse (CSA), Sexual Violence, Black women, Afro-Latina women, Soul Retrieval Work, Film

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December 2024

**DEDICATION**

This is for the Black girls,

The women,

The shadows we can no longer stifle.

To the ancestors within us,

Who swallowed bitter pills,

To the silence that threatens to sever us

With screeching agony—

We can no longer hush.

May we rise beyond these haunting turmoils,

And break generational curses,

To claim the peace, we are so deserving of.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

*Incongruous*, in its simplest definition, conveys a sense of inharmonious or out-of-placeness, serving as both the title and thematic anchor of this creative thesis. At its core, this screenplay<sup>1</sup> follows the journey of Essence Iseda, a young Afro-Latina woman whose struggle to reconcile her past and her emerging identity as a healer forms the backbone of this story. Through Essence's experiences, the screenplay explores themes of trauma, healing, and spiritual awakening, with a specific focus on how survivors of Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) confront the deeply embedded scars of their past. Essence's journey unfolds as a fictional narrative marked by internal dissonance and discord that reverberates through her life, caught between the expectations of her ancestral legacy as a healer and her own unresolved trauma. Thus, this sense of being "incongruous" extends beyond the individual, resonating with the broader experiences of Black and Afro-Latina women, whose identities are often shaped by multiple layers of cultural, racial, gendered, and spiritual intersections.

In explicit terms, I am centering the healing journey of Black and Afro-Latina women overcoming sexual abuse through the lens of spirituality, placing particular emphasis on the profound process of soul retrieval work. In doing so, this screenplay challenges dominant narratives of Black and Afro-Latina womanhood, particularly the trope of the Strong Black Woman (SBW), which often leaves little room for vulnerability or emotional depth and tranquility. Instead, *Incongruous* advocates for a more nuanced portrayal, one that embraces the complexities of trauma, vulnerability, and spiritual reclamation. By following Essence's journey of healing, this screenplay not only highlights the personal stakes of reclaiming her fragmented self but also reflects on the collective healing of intergenerational trauma that affects entire communities. The exploration of spirituality—especially through practices like soul retrieval

work—becomes a pathway for both personal and ancestral healing, offering a deeper understanding of what it means to heal beyond the physical and into the spiritual and emotional realm by exploring this incongruous state.

In laying the groundwork for this project, it is imperative to define key terms and concepts that underpin the themes explored in this thesis. First and foremost, it is essential to clarify that when referring to Black and Afro-Latina women in this context, I am specifically addressing individuals with heritage and ancestry from African and Latinx descent, either individually or in amalgam. For many Black-identifying persons, including myself, the term Black is synonymous with African American and other African descent who share a common ancestry with enslaved Africans carried across the Atlantic Ocean. Moreover, the term Afro-Latinx encapsulates individuals of Latinx descent who are also of African ancestry. As defined by Miriam Jiménez Román and Juan Flores in *The Afro-Latin@ Reader: History and Culture in the United States*, Afro-Latinx individuals are “those Latin@s of visible or self-proclaimed African descent,” resituating their amalgamated identity as both racially Black and ethnically Latinx (4). With this in mind, acknowledging the complex intersections of race, ethnicity, and gender within this project, particularly evident in the main character, we can delve into the transformative nature of spirituality as depicted in *Incongruous* and its significance for Black and Afro-Latina women. With this key understanding in place, we can now delve into the role of spirituality in this narrative.

Spirituality, or as I refer, the pursuit of healing the spirit, involves addressing emotional, psychological, and spiritual wounds or traumas that weigh on the bodymindspirit<sup>2</sup>, leading to an intuitive understanding of the self (Fernandes 10). In other words, spirituality here refers to a self-reflective process that includes various activities, practices, or experiences—such as soul

retrieval work—to promote an individual’s overall well-being by fostering spiritual growth and a sense of balance and wholeness (Castillo 147; Medina 257). As this screenplay centers on Essence’s spiritual path, the role of spirituality in *Incongruous* is evident through the incorporation of traditional shamanic and indigenous practices of soul retrieval work. This practice aims to reconfigure and integrate lost fragmentations of the soul resulting from traumatic experiences, such as those faced by CSA (Buenaflor 2). Moreover, these healing traditions resonate and are embraced deeply by individuals with a cultural heritage of African and Latinx descent, with practices like *curanderismo*<sup>3</sup> offering similar approaches to addressing bodymindspirit well-being.

Building upon the understanding of spirituality and its significance within the context of this story, it is essential to delve into the interconnected themes of sexual violence, specifically Child Sexual Abuse, and intergenerational trauma. Author Robin D. Stone, in her book, *No Secrets, No Lies: How Black Families Can Heal from Sexual Abuse* provides valuable insights into the nature of sexual violence in relation to power. Stone describes:

Sexual abuse, simply put, is when a person in power or authority uses you or forces you to perform for his or her sexual gratification. Sexual abuse can range from noncontact flashing and use of explicit pictures and language to touching and kissing to digital and penile penetration. It is a crime, which often stems from a sickness. And it is a violation of your body, your mind, and your spirit. (12).

Child Sexual Abuse then refers to any sexual activity or behavior involving a child, i.e. someone under the age of consent, that is intended to gratify or satisfy the perpetrator’s desires or sexual gratification through an unfair dynamic of power. Due to the hushed tones and silent pleas inherent in the nature of sexual violence, like Stone, this attitude enables abuse to persist

for generations to come, resulting in the notion of intergenerational trauma (12). The invasion and theft of one's agency not only affect individualized and singular moments but also journeys across the lineage that follows. Intergenerational trauma specifically refers to the transmission of traumatic experiences and their effects across generations within families or communities (Cerdeña, et al. 1; Dass-Brailsford 5). It recognizes that the impacts of trauma, such as abuse, violence, displacement, or oppression, can be passed down from one generation to the next, affecting the mental, emotional, and physical health of descendants (Weissinger et al. 59).

As we delve into the complexities of intergenerational trauma and the enduring effects of CSA, it becomes evident that these experiences have profound implications for the healing journey depicted in *Incongruous*. Building upon these foundational understandings, the primary objective of this creative thesis project is to explore the efficacy of soul retrieval work as a transformative mechanism for Black women recovering from sexual abuse, with a specific focus on addressing the unique healing needs of survivors of CSA. In doing so, the primary objective then challenges the prevailing portrayal of Black and Afro-Latina women in film, television, and media. *Incongruous* seeks to deconstruct and disassemble the entrenched stereotype of the strong and resilient Black woman, advocating for a narrative that embraces vulnerability and the plurality of Black womanhood instead, through the desire for healing. As argued by bell hooks in *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies*, the media exerts considerable influence in shaping perceptions of reality. Echoing hooks' insights, this project embraces the notion that popular culture can indeed serve as a vehicle for perpetuating and upholding the existing social order, underscoring the importance of critically examining media representations and advocating for more inclusive narratives.

To support the theoretical framework of this project, I adopt Kimberlé Crenshaw's critical race theory of intersectionality to weave the relationality of four themes. Intersectionality, as defined by Crenshaw, refers to an analytical framework or theoretical tool that examines how various social identities intersect and interact to shape individuals' experiences of oppression and privilege (Crenshaw 140; Collins 2; Nash 2). Originally coined in 1989, intersectionality emerged from the recognition of the complex and multidimensional nature of oppression, particularly in the overlapping dynamics of race and gender with regard to Black women. In Crenshaw's "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," we begin to understand how intersectionality can serve as a "basis for reconceptualizing race...[and] as a means for dealing with other marginalizations," in order to subvert institutional and societal structures of oppression (Crenshaw 1299). This approach emphasizes the interconnectedness of identities such as race, gender, class, sexuality, age, and more, recognizing that these intersections produce unique forms of discrimination, marginalization, and privilege.

In light of this intersectional framework, the screenplay meticulously focuses on four pivotal themes in *Incongruous*: (1) Black and Afro-Latina girlhood and womanhood; (2) sexual violence through the lens of CSA; (3) healing with spirituality, specifically soul retrieval work; and (4) intergenerational trauma. This thesis then argues that the depiction of spirituality in *Incongruous*, as well as in broader media representation, serves as a transformative force empowering Black and Afro-Latina women to confront generational silence and embark on a journey of healing liberated from colonial ideologies. To deepen this exploration, the following central research question guiding this thesis is then twofold: How does the portrayal of Black and Afro-Latina women in media influence societal perceptions of sexual violence, healing, and the

experiences of survivors, particularly in the context of Child Sexual Abuse? Additionally, how can the exploration of spirituality, specifically the utilization of soul retrieval work, contribute to the healing journey of Black and Afro-Latina women survivors of sexual abuse? These research questions will serve as the focal point for the narrative, guiding the analysis and exploration of healing aspects depicted in the screenplay and its broader implications for societal discourse and representation.

The intersecting link between these themes underscores the critical importance of this project within the broader context of the interdisciplinary field of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, as well as within the film, television, and media industry. As a general collective, we often perceive the media and political affairs as two separate entities when woven into narratives of fiction and make-believe, overlooking the impact that society has on scripting stories and how fantasy shapes our culture. This is where misconceptions and false information arise, as echoing bell hooks *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* reveals that concepts like feminism enter into our lives thirdhand through instruments of the visual enterprise (vii). This idea extends beyond the scope of feminism, as information is often shaped by the perspectives of others portrayed in film, television, and media, thus perpetuating knowledge shared through a thirdhand lens.

When engaging in narratives depicting Black, Afro-Latina, and other women of color, discrepancies emerge as prejudices and stereotypes reinforce the media, influenced by social connotations. In the case of this project, scripted tales and social standards protrude intersecting stories of Black women consistently depicted as exuding strong and resilient natures, solidifying the stereotype of the strong Black woman. Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant argues that "the defining quality of Black womanhood is strength," thus, contributing to a trope that has long

been deeply ingrained in society (1). When examining film and television pertinent to the themes of this thesis, specifically focusing on Black women and CSA, examples of the strong Black woman stereotype are evident in *The Color Purple*, *Eve's Bayou*, *Precious*, *A Jazzman's Blues*, and *How to Get Away with Murder*. Each of these narratives alludes to or briefly addresses the violence inflicted upon the girlhood of these Black women and subsequently avoids delving into the discussion of healing outside of colonial ideologies. Notably, these films predominantly perpetuate the strong Black woman trope, emphasizing endurance rather than the need for healing and introspection. It is at this junction that *Incongruous* aspires to break the intergenerational curse of the strong Black woman stereotype, asserting that strength is not a final destination. Instead, the screenplay suggests that the plurality of Black womanhood can coexist within vulnerability amidst hardships.

As *Incongruous* intentionally challenges popular culture's unfortunate stereotypes and delves into the complexities of Black womanhood, healing, and sexual violence, it prompts a reflection on the motivations that have led me to the selection of this particular topic. Looking back, shame is what lingers most in my memory. The truth is, this shame distilled from a place of sexual abuse, and to be frank, I was raped at the tender age of six by children only three to five years older than me and who shared a similar genealogy. I am one of many cases of Child Sexual Abuse. As an Afro-Latina whose skin is marked by the enduring violence inflicted upon Black and Brown communities, I am acutely aware of the reality of being susceptible to violence. This reality resonates deeply with what Christina Sharpe identifies as "the wake," encapsulating the ongoing impact of historical violence on marginalized groups as "in the wake, the past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture the present" (9). While it has been two

decades since this incident, it is here where I find fault in the generational silence of my community and gaps in the knowledge that hinder our collective understanding and healing.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The portrayal of Black and Afro-Latina women in media and society is accompanied by historically racial stereotypes and enduring perceptions that often overshadow the diverse experiences and identities within Black communities. In this literature review, I explore four main thematic components that illuminate the complexities surrounding the perpetuations of Black girlhood and womanhood, the prevalence of child sexual abuse (CSA), the inheritance of intergenerational trauma, and the role of spirituality and healing. In order to fully understand and portray these nuances in *Incongruous*, I have approached this project with these concepts in mind, summoning both scholarly insights and lived experiences to guide the narrative, character development, and world building.

Drawing on the works of Angela Davis and Patricia Hill Collins, I first examine how the legacy of slavery continues to shape societal expectations of Black women, perpetuating stereotypes that reinforce notions of strength and resilience. This influence is evident in the persistence of stereotypes such as the Strong Black Woman, which, while ostensibly celebrating resilience, paradoxically reinforces systematic mistreatment and oppression. Building upon this foundation, I delve into the covert epidemic of CSA, as unveiled by authors such as Robin D. Stone, Aishah Shahidah Simmons, and Roxane Gay, shedding light on the systemic vulnerabilities faced by Black children. Furthermore, I explore the inheritance of intergenerational trauma, as articulated by scholars like Resmaa Menakem and Priscilla Dass-Brailsford, examining how historical, racial, and sexual wounds manifest across multiple generations of Black girls and women. Finally, I investigate the role of spirituality and healing in navigating these complex legacies, summoning the insights of Gloria Anzaldúa and Audre Lorde to explore how concepts like *nepantla* and the erotic offer transformative pathways toward

healing and resilience. Through these thematic lenses, I aim to deconstruct pervasive narratives and amplify the voices and experiences of Black women navigating a complex landscape of identity, survival, and most importantly, healing, in my project *Incongruous*.

## **2.1 The Strong Black Woman Embellished in *Us***

*Incongruous* explores the potentiality and evolution of Black womanhood through its central character, Essence Iseda. Her identity is intentionally crafted to challenge and transcend the stereotypes that have historically constrained Black women, particularly the trope of the Strong Black Woman (SBW). By portraying her as a multifaceted individual, the narrative seeks to dismantle the traditional scripts and preconceived notions that society has imposed upon Black women's voices, agency, and vulnerability, while redefining the conventional ideas of strength. Through the plot, she confronts both personal and intergenerational wounds, navigating the complexities of healing through the profound process of spiritual and emotional reclamation. Essence's journey serves as a counterpoint to the narrow depictions of Black women perpetuated in media and society, where strength is often equated with survival at the expense of vulnerability.

On-screen, the once static and fixed images of Black women have evolved into multidimensional portrayals, yet they remain to emulate traditional scripts that have catered to pre-established stereotypes of the past. These stereotypes, as marked by Angela Davis<sup>4</sup> and identified by Patricia Hill Collins as controlling images<sup>5</sup>, rigidly encapsulate the relationship between Black womanhood and strength. It is through their work that I begin to unravel how conceptions of Black womanhood are mirrored in both the media and society. Davis argues that the legacy of slavery has had profound and lasting effects on the standards and expectations placed upon Black women, contributing to the development of stereotypes that influence societal

perceptions of womanhood (1-15). These perceptions, or controlling images, as Collins notes, serve as a form of social control, where “the enslaved African woman became the basis for the definition of our society’s *Other*” (Collins 70).

As Black life deviates from conceptions of the mythical norm<sup>6</sup>, strength becomes a pivotal trait that challenges traditional ideals of white womanhood, countering the traditional white damsel archetype. Without this expectation of strength, caricatures like the Jezebel, Mammy, Matriarch, and Sapphire<sup>7</sup> would not exist, for it is strength that lies at the core of Black womanhood as portrayed by these tropes. This argument, highlighted not only by scholars like Davis and Collins, but also Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant, underscores the enduring portrayal of the exceptional and Strong Black Woman, a figure that persists within and beyond the shackles of enslavement (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 28; Collins 76-78; Davis 11-15, 132). However, these representations often marginalize the vulnerability and emotional complexity of Black women, reducing them to one-dimensional symbols of resilience.

Essence’ character in this creative project pushes back against these controlling images by embodying a more nuanced portrayal of Black womanhood. Her narrative disrupts the SBW stereotype by showing that healing—whether emotional, spiritual, or intergenerational—requires embracing vulnerability, something often denied to Black women by societal expectations. The exploration of Essence’s trauma within the context of soul retrieval work highlights how Black and Afro-Latina women are not simply defined by resilience, but by the complexity of their experiences and their capacity for healing and transformation.

This legacy of strength entangles itself into the becomingness of Black womanhood through an inherent sense of survival and resilience. Paradoxically, this inheritance also displaces experiences of harm, which often emerge as a result of historical and ongoing oppression

(Beauboeuf-Lafontant 41-44). As a consequence, the Strong Black Woman archetype is then endowed to young Black girls as a preconceived default etched from the experiences of enslaved bodies. This legacy traces back to chattel slavery where Black girls (and boys) as young as two and three years old were exploited for labor and deprived of all child-like behaviors, including playtime (Davis 2; Epstein et al. 4). Racial stereotypes further exacerbate this phenomenon, leading to the adultification<sup>8</sup> of Black children. Dr. Monique W. Morris argues that Black girls are often perceived and treated as if they possess the maturity and strength of Black women, burdening them with adult expectations far beyond their years (34).

These stereotypes—such as the Jezebel, Mammy, and Sapphire—reinforce the static and fixed dominant paradigms of Black femininity, effectively embedding the essence of the SBW into the consciousness and being of young Black girls (Collins; Epstein et al. 5). Consequently, the harm inflicted here manifests in the premature adultification of Black girls, robbing them of not only their adolescence but their innocence. This premature adultification, as scholars like Beauboeuf-Lafontant argue, strips Black girls of the space to experience vulnerability, often erasing their pain in favor of narratives of strength and survival (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 37).

In *Incongruous*, this legacy is explored through Essence's journey as she confronts the weight of intergenerational trauma passed down through her lineage in moments of silence and disclosure. Her process of healing becomes a reclamation of both her identity and her right to vulnerability, challenging the notion that strength is her only inheritance. By centering Essence's journey of spiritual and emotional healing, *Incongruous* redefines what it means to be strong and resilient, offering a counter-narrative to the pervasive SBW archetype.

## 2.2 An Epidemic of CSA

Understanding the profound impact of sexual abuse, specifically Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) within Black and Afro-Latina communities is integral to the narrative of *Incongruous*. Through the lens of the main character, Essence, the story sheds light on the covert epidemic of CSA prevalent in marginalized communities subjected to harmful institutions of racial and gendered oppression. As a survivor herself, Essence's journey amplifies these voices and experiences, with the project seeking to challenge societal stigmas, dismantle harmful rhetoric, and advocate for a more empathetic understanding of CSA in society and film.

Child Sexual Abuse, or CSA, is defined by scholars in the field as any sexual activity between an adult and a child or between two children when one exerts power over the other (Eirliani 158-159; Mathews & Collin-Vézina 146; MedlinePlus para. 1; Rowan et al. vii; Stone 12; Wurtele & Miller-Perrin 6). This form of abuse can take many forms, including molestation, rape, and exploitation. The trauma inflicted by CSA can have long-lasting effects on survivors, impacting their mental, emotional, and physical well-being from childhood to adulthood. Research indicates that survivors often experience psychological trauma in the form of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, and in rare cases complex post-traumatic stress disorder (Maniglio 97; Roosa et al. 65; Widom 1223-24). As a reflection of the persistent psychological distress, lack of sleep and nightmares are commonly reported as an effect of sexual trauma experienced by survivors of CSA (Agargun et al. 139; Dass-Brailsford 271; Shaw et al. 1592).

Building upon these understandings, authors such as Robin D. Stone in *No Secrets, No Lies: How Black Families Can Heal from Sexual Abuse*, Aishah Shahidah Simmons in *Love WITH Accountability: Digging Up the Roots of Child Sexual Abuse*, and Roxane Gay in *Hunger:*

*A Memoir of (My) Body* unveil a covert epidemic of violence in CSA. Their work lays bare the intricate ways in which systemic institutions of race and gender leave children, especially children of color, vulnerable and susceptible to harm like CSA. Stone argues that the interrelationship between culture, race, and gender shapes typical rhetoric conveyed to children by adults, peers, and the media. She highlights how these messages often disclose notions “that children are expendable, that men matter most, that Blacks are inferior” and that women are subservient opposites (22 & 24). Through society and the media, misconceptions like “boys will be boys” and “children will be children” brew lethal rhetoric that normalize and dismiss the severity of cases of sexual violence (23). While society often attempts to preserve childhood innocence, Morris points out that institutionalized racism strips Black girls of this conception, leaving them displaced within both their adolescence and the protections afforded to other (white) children.

In this dialogue, Simmons’ anthology and Gay’s memoir restore the veracity of the epidemic through the lived experiences of diasporic Black and Afro-Latinx children and adult survivors. It is in Gay’s memoir that her experience resonates with my own in understanding CSA beyond society’s limited conception that it only occurs through adult-to-child violence. This shared narrative of survival and trauma informs how I approach writing *Incongruous*, which aims to present a fuller portrayal of CSA, including the rarely explored or discussed phenomenon of child-on-child violence.

In cinematic representations such as *The Color Purple*, *Eve’s Bayou*, *Precious*, *A Jazzman’s Blues*, and *How to Get Away with Murder*, we witness the reinforcement of the misconception that CSA is strictly adult-to-child through hushed tones and jarred revelations. These films, while diverse in composition, consistently depict CSA as an isolated incident

involving an adult perpetrator and a child survivor. Characters like Celie, Ciseley Batiste, Leanne, and Annalise Keating endure various forms of sexual abuse, yet their stories converge through this limited and singular lens. By prioritizing this narrative, media representations contribute to the societal misconception of CSA, overlooking the complexities of the epidemic, especially in cases of child-on-child sexual violence.

This oversight obscures instances of harm between children, such as my personal experience and that of Roxane Gay, as well as at least one-third of CSA cases (Allardyce and Yates). Rather than perpetuating that CSA is exclusively perpetrated by adults, *Incongruous* expands the scope of representation by addressing both child-on-child and adult-to-child sexual violence. Through Essence's story and the children, she meets along her healing journey, the film explores the full spectrum of CSA experiences. Essence's process of healing becomes central to the narrative, as she moves through painful memories of her past, highlighting the complexities of trauma recovery. By prioritizing these narratives, *Incongruous*, aims to challenge societal misconceptions, advocate for broader understanding, and offer space for the healing of those impacted by CSA.

### **2.3 Inherited Wounds Distilled in Habits of Silence**

In the creative side of this thesis, the script *Incongruous* focuses on the effects of intergenerational trauma as it lies as a core theme of the narrative, explored through the lives of three generations of women: Essence, her mother Evelyn, and her grandmother Lula Mae. Each of these women has survived Child Sexual Abuse (CSA), and their varying responses to the trauma reveal the deeply embedded patterns of silence and emotional suppression that are passed down through generations. Lula Mae's silence, Evelyn's rejection and loss of her powers, and Essence's willingness to confront her past each represent different ways of managing inherited

trauma. The script delves into the ways that trauma not only impacts each individual but also how it becomes embedded within families and communities, shaping the behaviors and coping mechanisms of future generations. While Evelyn and Lula Mae have internalized their pain, using silence as a form of survival, Essence embarks on a journey to break this cycle of suppression, reclaiming both her powers and her vulnerability. By confronting her inherited trauma, Essence seeks to disrupt the destructive patterns that have haunted her lineage, offering a pathway toward healing and liberation.

Child Sexual Abuse is an immensely trauma-inducing experience; therefore, understanding and defining trauma, especially intergenerational trauma, is crucial to the development of *Incongruous*. Trauma permeates the bodymindspirit, as evidenced by Resmaa Menakem, who expands our understanding of trauma beyond the psychological phenomenon to encompass its physical *happening* to and within the body (7). Trauma is defined as an event or circumstance that is experienced by an individual, resulting in life-threatening or detrimental effects on one's mental, physical, emotional, social, and spiritual well-being (SAMHSA). This trauma, however, transcends beyond individual encounters and extends its reach across generations through what is termed as intergenerational trauma. Also known as transgenerational trauma, generational trauma, multigenerational trauma, or historical trauma, refers to the transmission of trauma from one generation to the next, affecting future lineages (Conching and Thayer 74). It is defined by scholars as the cumulative emotional and psychological wounding that is expelled upon descendants that follow in the wake of violence (Cerdeña et al. 1; Dass-Brailsford 5, Rakoff et al. 24-26). In this way, intergenerational trauma not only reflects specific traumatic events like CSA, but also the behaviors and coping mechanisms that follow, such as silence, shame, and avoidance, are inherited by future generations.

It should be noted that “this culture of silence as a coping strategy has roots in chattel slavery” and through this silence, Black descendants could “distance themselves from the emotional and psychological burden of victimization” (Gómez and Gobin 3). However, it is this silence that becomes a barrier to healing as it creates patterns that sow into lineages hereafter, ultimately shaping the ways trauma is carried, held, and expressed. As Menakem asserts, trauma lodges in the bodies of those affected, and over time, these inherited wounds manifest not only in the bodymindspirit, but are also “passed down as habits, actions, sensations, urges, images, narratives, beliefs, and ideas” becoming both cultural and individual norms and traits (102). Therefore, trauma latches onto the spirits, psyches, bodies, and heirs of the oppressed, particularly in communities of color, as they navigate through intersecting systems of race and gender, including legacies of slavery and sexual abuse (Dass-Brailsford 6; Hardy 25; Menakem 38; Quinn). In *Incongruous*, the physical and emotional impacts of this trauma are explored through scenes that visualize Essence’s journey, showing how trauma lodges in her bodymindspirit and disrupts her relationships with magic, herself, and her family. Survival instincts of the past fundamentally harm Black girls and women in the present as they continue to perpetuate cycles of emotional suppression, hypervigilance, and resilience at the expense of vulnerability and healing. As author Kesho Scott attunes, “In our silences, we are tragically doomed to create ‘habits of survival,’ always to adapt ourselves to the temporal and changing guises of on-going racial, sexual, and class oppression” (189). Essence’s journey to reclaim her powers and confront her trauma highlights this very real struggle to break free from inherited behaviors of silence and emotional suppression. These inherited behaviors, though once necessary for survival, now serve as barriers to confronting trauma, thus impeding the generational process of recovery and liberation.

As author Dass-Brailsford notes, the effects of intergenerational trauma manifest in “high rates of depression, anger, stress, hypervigilance, [and] low self-esteem” (5). This stress leads to psychological disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Cerdeña et al. 4; Conching and Thayer 74). In the context of racial violence, this stress is identified by Sekou Mims as Post Traumatic Slavery Disorder<sup>9</sup> and coined by Joy DeGruy as Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS)<sup>10</sup>, highlighting the multigenerational transmission of trauma. Christina Sharpe’s concept of “the wake,” where the past continuously affects the present, and Erica Wilkins et al. idea of Residual Effects of Slavery (RES)<sup>11</sup> further emphasize how this stress is ongoing, particularly in race- and gender- based violence surrounding Black women. Specifically, noting here that hypervigilance and emotional suppression evolve into the Strong Black Woman trope, syndrome, and archetype, demanding Black women to endure and persevere in the face of adversity (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 71).

Cultivated within this misogynoiristic<sup>12</sup> domain, this integrated assault has engendered a culture of secrecy and silence that reverberates across generations of Black women as a survival mechanism (Hine 916; West 2). This silence resides within the confines of controlling images like the Jezebel because of her innate sexual nature that would vindicate her abuse, specifically instances of rape. This further perpetuates the notion that strength lies in enduring silence and explicates the Strong Black Woman archetype as the defining core of Black girlhood and womanhood. The intergenerational transmission of trauma is intricately woven into the fabric of this silence, passed down from one generation to the next as a means of self-preservation in the face of systemic oppression and violence. This perpetuation of silence not only serves to protect the perpetrators but also reinforces the erasure of Black women's voices and experiences, contributing to the normalization of trauma within Black communities. As this project explores,

breaking free from these entrenched patterns of silence and suppression requires confronting trauma head-on, allowing Black women like Essence to redefine strength not as enduring suffering but as embracing vulnerability and seeking healing. As a result, the Strong Black Woman archetype becomes both a shield and a burden, shaping the ways in which Black women navigate and internalize their own trauma while perpetuating cycles of silence and suffering across generations.

#### **2.4 Healing the Bodymindspirit in Nepantla**

Unanchored in time and space, Essence roams the depths of the in-between as she grapples with her past traumas. Through navigating this space, a threshold between her present reality and the realm of her childhood memories and dreams, the in-between becomes a vital backdrop for her healing journey. In using soul retrieval work, Essence embarks on a quest to reconnect with her inner child, a piece of her fragmented soul wandering beyond. This in-between place, one of spiritual, psychological, and liminal awakening, mirrors Gloria Anzaldúa's notion of *nepantla*, a dynamic middle ground that allows Essence to confront her deepest wounds and foster her way to wholeness.

The in-between, as Gloria Anzaldúa begins to etch out in her publication of *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* and molds in *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*, serves as a “bridge between worlds,” which she articulates as *nepantla* (*Light in the Dark* 28). As noted in *Light in the Dark*, *nepantla* is a Nahuatl (Aztec) word for an “in-between space, el lugar entre medio” or “el lugar de la frontera” meaning the border place (28 & 47). It is a psychological and liminal space of displacement that leads to *nepantlas*, or places, where transformation and healing embark at the midway point of consciousness and unconsciousness (2, 17, 56). These places traverse in various *nepantlas*,

understood as social and cultural identities of marginal groups that defy the status quo. The borderlands, serving as a threshold between our everyday world and the spirit realm, are inhabited by “Los atravesados”—the crossed ones, the *destierro*<sup>13</sup>—or as I observe, the misfits: those considered incongruous, out of harmony, and out of place (*Borderlands* 3). In exploring the erasure and displacement of women of color, particularly Black, Afro-Latina, and indigenous women, Yomaira Figueroa’s work on *destierro* becomes a critical lens through which we understand the collective experiences of cultural and spiritual dispossession. As Figueroa notes, *destierro* is not only a historical experience of banishment but also an ongoing process of erasure, where women of color navigate the complexities of both remembering and reclaiming their identities amidst oppressive forces that seek to silence their narratives (225). This act of remembering then becomes a form of resistance, as this state of banishment and dislocation is where Anzaldúa finds significance and opportunity to heal within the nexus of spirituality by immersing oneself into chaos, or the “fear of the unknown” (*Light in the Dark* 17).

A study analyzing the life story interviews of 50 adult female CSA survivors reveals themes of time and spatial disorientation, memory deficit—in the form of chaos, exhaustion, and confusion—and distorted perceptions of the body, mind, and identity (Jacobs-Kayam & Lev-Weisel 1). Trauma, whether it is sexual, racial, historical, or gendered, is considered a factor that alters time perception, creating pockets of time and spatial disorientation, limbo, chaos, and *nepantla* (2). Not only are *los atravesados*, the incongruous, capable of entrance of the in-between, but sexual violence also projects survivors into this state of *nepantla* or limbo because of the profound disruption of *bodymindspirit*. As survivors grapple with this disturbance and navigate the complexities of trauma, they also contend with the intricate interplay between time perception and emotional states. It is understood that the time-emotion paradox complicates our

understanding of time perception, as emotions have been shown to influence our inner-clock, leaving CSA survivors in a state of disorientation (3). It is this state of emotion that becomes vital to spiritual healing.

Tapping into the transformative and healing properties of *nepantla* is not without feeling, or what author Audre Lorde identifies as the erotic. In her seminal essay “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” Lorde illuminates the transformative potential of the erotic as a source of power, creativity, and healing within marginal communities. Lorde’s exploration of the erotic goes beyond its conventional patriarchal associations with sexuality and instead embraces it as a deeply feminine and spiritual force that influences every aspect of human existence. She notes that the erotic is a bridge between “the sensual—those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions” echoing similar insights of the authors presented before in discussion of *bodymindspirit* (56). Thus, understanding the erotic as feeling through the embodied *happening* of the flesh, the psychological, and the soul is vital to transformative healing. Similarly to Anzaldúa, Lorde identifies chaos as a crucial component of the erotic, where the erotic is a measurement of self and chaos is our deepest sentiments (54).

Soul retrieval work also inhabits a liminal space, bridging the realms of past trauma and present healing to reclaim lost fragments of self and restore a sense of wholeness (Buenaflor 2; Ingerman 16 & 30). In conversation with Anzaldúa, practitioners like Buenaflor acknowledge the relationality between *nepantla* and soul retrieval work, as this sacred middle ground “recognizes that ritual practices, including ones that involve healing, releasing, integrating, and new beginnings, take place in a liminal space of constant transition” (Buenaflor 11). *Nepantla* and soul retrieval work come together, underscoring that the transformative potential of healing the spirit will reflect in the integration of chaos and confusion, or as Lorde declares in the erotic.

Theorist Lara Medina affirms that “the confusion of nepantla must be embraced and worked through in order to reach the balanced state of clarity” (Medina 285). This fusion of practice emphasizes the necessity of confronting and navigating the complexities of inner “obscurity and clarity” to achieve a profound sense of spiritual alignment within both light and shadow (Medina 284-6).

Soul loss is an integral aspect of soul retrieval work, representing the fragmentation and displacement of one's essence or vital energy. In many traditional healing practices, including those found within curanderismo and shamanic traditions, it is believed that traumatic experiences or prolonged exposure to stress can cause a person's soul to fragment. Soul loss can result from various traumatic experiences, whether they are isolated events or ongoing forms of trauma. These experiences can include sexual violence, physical abuse, incest, the loss of a loved one, miscarriage, exposure to war or combat, addiction, accidents or injuries, surgery, unhealthy relationships, and dissatisfaction with one's career, among others (Buenaflor 29; Ingerman 16 & 30). The manifestations of soul loss are diverse and can impact individuals in extensive ways. Symptoms may include feelings of depression, anxiety, fatigue, insomnia, the recurrence of unpleasant patterns or memories, lack of motivation, eating disorders, engaging in destructive behaviors, and experiencing extreme emotional states—ranging from being overly emotional to feeling emotionally numb or detached (Buenaflor 29). Thus, soul loss, as Ingerman puts it, occurs when trauma “catapults the soul from the body” (Ingerman 24).

### 3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

#### 3.1 Theorizing in the Margins

For people of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say that our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, because dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking.

—Barbara Christian, “The Race for Theory”

In the academy, conventional barriers that segregate scholarly pursuits from artistic endeavors are continuously challenged to evolve, expand, and intersect with creative *conocimiento*<sup>14</sup> and knowledge. This merging of disciplines mirrors long-standing practices in communities of color, where art and theory have often been indistinguishable. Not only do these two spheres intersect, but it is argued that “artistic practice and research are synonymous” (Jackson 157). In communities of color, these creative perspectives have held precedence in shaping theories and understandings, particularly in the historical absence and gatekeeping of academia. Barbara Christian eloquently captures the essence of theorizing in the margins, highlighting its departure from colonial modes of reason. Here, in this epigraph, her reflection illuminates a profound truth—that marginalized communities have long engaged in theoretical discourse through narrative, storytelling, and linguistic innovation, challenging colonial hegemonic structures of knowledge production.

In this creative thesis project, I situate *Incongruous* within this framework, using narrative to theorize the intersections of race, gender, trauma, age, and spirituality. Christian’s idea of theorizing as a verb, rather than a noun, is particularly relevant here as my script uses storytelling not only as an artistic practice but as a form of lived theory. Through this lens, the

theoretical discourse of this project draws from key thinkers like Kimberlé Crenshaw and Gloria Anzaldúa, whose work on intersectionality and nepantla provide fertile ground for an intersectional-nepantla framework.

### **3.2 Intersectionality as a Tool of Creation**

It is here that Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality emerges as a significant theoretical framework and methodological tool in the construction of *Incongruous*. To reiterate, intersectionality is defined as the overlapping social justice problems that generate multiple layers of injustice, inequality, and discrimination (Crenshaw 4:55). This framework disrupts the linear and monolithic narratives of oppression by recognizing the interconnectedness of social identities such as race, gender, sexuality, class, and ability. A recent report by Luminate<sup>15</sup> reveals that one of the prominent trends in screen representation as of 2023, is the embrace of intersectionality as a method of creation. This trend allows narratives to better reflect the multifaceted identities of character development and world-building. This approach enables a more holistic understanding of systemic and interpersonal violence, oppression, and privilege, echoing bell hooks' assertion that cinema takes on a pedagogical function (2). As a lens of analysis, intersectionality helps decode and unpack existing stereotypes, like the Strong Black Woman, Mammy, Matriarch, Jezebel, and Sapphire, as well as facilitate the fabrication of more diverse representations of Black and Afro-Latina women on screen. While intersectionality offers a crucial framework for analyzing power dynamics and reshaping narratives, it does not always fully account for the experiential and spiritual dimensions of lived experiences beyond colonial ideologies.

### 3.3 Nepantla Conocimiento/Knowledge in Art

Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of nepantla—a liminal space of in-betweenness where transformation can occur—expands upon intersectionality by delving into the psychic and spiritual realms where identities converge and diverge, creating dynamic landscapes, or nepantlas, of healing the bodymindspirit (29 & 127). In nepantla, the borders between self and other blur, giving rise to new possibilities for self-liberation and self-healing. Through engaging in creative acts, Anzaldúa's concept of nepantla engenders spiritual inquiry through *conocimiento*. She identifies *conocimiento* as being obtained through various forms of expression, including “writing, art-making, dancing, healing, teaching, meditation, and spiritual activism—both mental and somatic” (119). In addition to Anzaldúa's insights, other scholars or nepantleras echo the importance of creativity in unlocking spiritual consciousness. As expressed by Lara Medina, creativity serves as a pathway to deeper spiritual connections, fostering relationships with inner, inter, and transpersonal powers (169). This aligns with Anzaldúa's notion of nepantla and *conocimiento*, which emphasizes the multifaceted nature of spiritual inquiry and self-discovery through diverse forms of artistic expression.

### 3.4 Intersectional-Nepantla Bridging Theory and Practice

Drawing upon Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality and Anzaldúa's notion of nepantla as a theoretical framework in conjunction, seeks to bridge the gap between academic analysis and creative expression, recognizing the interconnectedness of intellectual inquiry and artistic creation within different social locations of identity and spirituality. It is within this intersectional-nepantla that I situate the theoretical framework for understanding the world and characters in *Incongruous*. As noted by scholar Erin Ranft, intersectional-nepantla is a framework that applies both internally/personally and externally/systemically to the lives of

women of color, examining the lived relationality between the two (212-213). By embracing diverse forms of knowledge production and centering the voices and experiences of Black and Afro-Latina women, I aim to create a space where theory and praxis converge in transformative ways. Thus, uniting the analytical rigor of intersectionality with the transformative potential of nepantla to capture the complexities of Essence's intersecting identities and her journey towards introspection and healing.

Intersectional-nepantla then serves as a core framework not only for critical analysis, as highlighted by Ranft, but also as a platform for crafting narratives that challenge existing stereotypes and amplify diverse voices. Through this lens, we can transcend limiting portrayals of Black and Afro-Latina womanhood, embracing a more nuanced exploration of identity, resistance, and the journey toward healing in the aftermath of systemic and interpersonal trauma, particularly CSA. Nepantla, functioning as a bridge, offers a space for the opportunity to heal, generating an act of rebellion. As hooks emphasizes, the screen becomes a site not just for reimagining culture, but actively shapes it (12). Thus, why not cultivate a culture of representation that we want to actively embody? This is the vision I offer through *Incongruous* as a means to illuminate the complex interplay between media representations of Black and Afro-Latina women and societal perceptions of sexual violence, healing, and survivor experiences. Additionally, it serves as a platform to explore the role of spirituality, particularly through the lens of soul retrieval work in nepantla, fostering the healing journey of Black and Afro-Latina women survivors of sexual abuse.

### **3.5 Critical Film Theory and the Lens of Craft**

In summoning Black feminist thought, Chicana Studies, and decolonial feminism to illuminate the experiences of Black and Afro-Latina women, I also engage with critical film

theory to examine the ways in which media representations can challenge dominant narratives composed by the traditional white heteropatriarchal gaze. Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze, which posits the viewer as male and the object of desire as female, serves as a seminal lens to analyze the visual dynamics of power and control in mainstream cinema, particularly regarding gendered representation (364-5). Similarly, bell hooks' notion of the oppositional gaze offers a counter-narrative that empowers marginalized viewers, specifically that of the Black female spectator, to resist and subvert oppressive representations on screen by focusing on racialized gender dynamics (468). By employing critical film theory and intersectionality, we gain insights into discerning approaches that can then challenge the white heteropatriarchal gaze in filmmaking, enabling a mindful and conscientious approach to critical and theoretical creative endeavors. *Incongruous* then adopts a lens that is distinctly female, Black, and Latina, diverging from the traditional paradigm of patriarchal whiteness and aligning with hooks' concept of the oppositional gaze. The goal is not only to ensure adequate and diverse representation of Black and Afro-Latina women but also to empower creators from the margins to craft narratives that defy conventional norms.

Moving from theory to practice, the interdisciplinary frameworks of intersectional-nepantla and critical film theory will serve as guiding lights in the creation of *Incongruous*, specifically intertwining the healing journey of Black and Afro-Latina women overcoming sexual abuse through the lens of spirituality. These theories will not merely exist as abstract concepts but will actively inform and shape every facet of the project, from character development to narrative structure to world-building and thematic exploration. Each component presented before—the Strong Black Woman, the epidemic of CSA, intergenerational wounds, and healing in nepantla—shape and mold Essence's narrative as an offering of plurality in Black

womanhood. The axis of this story is ignited by the pursuit of healing the spirit, incongruous with the weight of personal and systematic trauma. Thus, the theoretical framework presented here not only guides the exploration of race- and gender- based issues but also serves as a blueprint for crafting narratives that challenge dominant paradigms and empower marginalized voices. *Incongruous* emerges as a testament to the power of intersectional exploration, spiritual inquiry, and critical engagement in reshaping representations and fostering healing in the face of adversity.

#### 4 BEHIND THE SCENES: THE MAKING OF *INCONGRUOUS*

The narrative of *Incongruous* is grounded in a classic three-act structure, but it is reimagined through the lens of intersectionality and nepantla. This reimagining allows for more than a simple progression of events; it creates space to explore multiple layers of identity, trauma, and healing that define Essence Iseda's story. The three-act structure provides a familiar rhythm to the narrative while allowing for non-linear elements and magical realism to blend with the very real, systemic traumas that women of color face. Through this structure, I guide Essence's internal and external conflicts, making room for the world of *Incongruous* to unfold its themes of healing, intergenerational trauma, and spiritual reclamation. By rooting the story in these theoretical frameworks, I intend not only to tell a compelling story but to create a space for Black, Afro-Latina, and Indigenous women to see themselves reflected in the fantasy genre, where healing takes precedence over vengeance.

Before diving into the plot itself, it's worth contextualizing *Incongruous* within broader cinematic conventions, particularly the three-act structure as it applies to the fantasy-drama genre. The three-act structure has long been a foundational element of screenwriting, particularly in Hollywood and Western cinema. However, its flexibility allows for reimagination in genre films like *Incongruous*, which blends fantasy, drama, and social commentary together. This structure dates back to the Greek philosopher, Aristotle, and later formally codified by Syd Field in *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting* (30). In a typical three-act structure, each act serves a distinct purpose:

- **Act One: Set Up** – Establishes the protagonist (main character), the world they live in, and the central conflict.

- **Act Two: Confrontation** – Deepens the conflict and introduces complications, often focusing on the protagonist’s inability to overcome obstacles, which forces internal growth.
- **Act Three: Resolution** – Concludes the story’s conflict and often brings about the protagonist’s transformation.

While this traditional structure has been adapted, restructured, and redefined over time, its core remains centered around a clear beginning (Act One), middle (Act Two), and end (Act Three). Within each of these acts are critical plot points, also known as beats, that help drive the story forward, moving the story into different acts as it progresses. As Field notes, plot points are “any incident, episode, or event that hooks into the action and spins it around in another direction” (26). Plot points can be further understood as what Blake Snyder in his book, *Save the Cat!: The Last Book on Screenwriting You’ll Ever Need* refers to as “major turns” that play a vital role in shifting the trajectory of the story (104). At the bare minimum, these points or turns include:

- **Inciting Incident:** Also known as the catalyst, this is the moment that disrupts the protagonist’s ordinary world, propelling them toward the central conflict of the story (Snyder 77). It is where the journey begins, often taking place within the first 10-15 minutes of the film.
- **Plot Point 1:** This is the first major turning point that transitions the narrative from Act One to Act Two. It can be understood as where the protagonist commits to the journey ahead and the stakes are raised, often presenting them with a challenge or choice that they cannot ignore. Field describes this as the moment when the protagonist fully engages with the central conflict (30).

- **Midpoint:** This point occurs in the middle or halfway through the story and it is where the stakes are elevated, and the direction of the story shifts (Snyder 84). Here, this shift can exist within a rise or collapse in the main characters journey.
- **Plot Point 2:** This beat propels the story into Act Three, and typically happens as the protagonist faces their darkest hour or greatest challenge. It's known as the plot point where everything seems lost or in a state of emergency before leading into Act Three (Field 103).
- **Climax:** Snyder notes the climax as the “finale,” distinguishing this point as the peak of the story's tension and conflict (90). It's the decisive confrontation between the protagonist and antagonist (whether external or internal).
- **Resolution:** This is where the story's central conflict is resolved, and all loose ends are tied up (Field 101 & 118).

While these structural elements offer a framework for storytelling, *Incongruous* deliberately bends these conventions to reflect the intersecting themes of identity, trauma, and healing. By weaving in the complexities of spiritual reclamation, intergenerational trauma, and personal transformation, *Incongruous* turns the three-act structure into a vessel for exploring deeper emotional and cultural landscapes. Each plot point and beat in the script is not merely a device for advancing the narrative, but a moment for Essence Iseda to confront, challenge, and ultimately heal from her fragmented past.

#### 4.1 The Plot of *Incongruous*

##### Logline

In a world where healers are on the brink of extinction, Essence Iseda—half-human, half-bruja—must confront the shadows of her past to harness her full potential by entering the In-

Between, a mystical realm where the key to saving not only herself but the future of the Collective lies, as a mysterious illness threatens to eradicate its last remaining members.

### Main Plot & Subplots

#### Main Plot (A):

The main plot point revolves around Essence Iseda's discovery of her healing powers. It occurs when she unintentionally heals Soren from the parasitic wraithroot infection. This event forces her to confront the fact that she is part of a lineage of healers and sets her on the path to joining the Collective to develop her abilities. Her decision to go with Nix and accept her role as a healer propels the story forward.

#### Subplot (B):

Focuses on Essence's internal journey of healing from personal trauma, particularly the familial and intergenerational trauma that blocks her magical powers. This subplot includes her unresolved past with her grandmother and mother, her struggle with her identity as a mixed-race woman, and her eventual realization that her trauma is preventing her from accessing her full potential as a healer. This is intertwined with her journey to confront and understand the trauma she's suppressed for years.

### Plot Points (Beats) & Three-Act Structure

#### Act One:

- Inciting Incident: Essence unknowingly heals Phoenix Castillo, also known as Nix, at a party.

- This is the moment when Essence's powers are confirmed by Nix, a member of the collective, marking the point where something extraordinary happens.
- Plot Point 1: Essence decides to join Nix at the Collective to understand her new found legacy.
  - After healing Soren from a near death experience with wraithroot, Essence realizes she is a witch with healing abilities. Thus, she makes the pivotal decision to leave her old life behind and join Nix to discover more about herself and this new found world of magic.

#### Act Two:

- Midpoint: Essence travels to the In-Between to find answers about her dormant and unstable powers (Diving into Subplot B).
  - Essence drinks the tea/potion that she makes with Tala, a Black Indigenous Seer, and enters the In-Between for the first time. During this disorientating experience, her memories crosswire with those her grandmother and mother.
    - (This is where the complexity of her trauma is foreshadowed, but she is not able to fully understand or heal. It represents a deeper confrontation with her past and abilities that leave her confused and overwhelmed).
- Plot Point 2: Essence learns about her mother's contraction of wraithroot.
  - As Essence trains, she learns that her mother is infected with wraithroot.
    - (This revelation dramatically raises the stakes, adding personal urgency to her journey. She must now find the cure faster and confront her unresolved emotional and magical tension to do so).

#### Act Three:

- Climax: Essence confronts her trauma in the In-Between.
  - Essence enters the In-Between to face her deepest trauma and make sense of things. She uncovers a past she had long suppressed, revealing an incident of child sexual abuse (CSA).
    - (This confrontation is the key to unlocking her full healing abilities, like a weight lifted, as she integrates the fragmented parts of her spirit and accepts the pain).
- Resolution: Essence not only heals her mother, but those infected in the Collective, gifting the remedy to Zuri.
  - After confronting her trauma, Essence returns from the In-Between and heals her mother, Zuri, and those who have fallen ill at the Collective.

## 4.2 Character Breakdowns

- Essence Iseda:
  - The protagonist of the story, Essence is a 23-year-old half-human, half-bruja who discovers her rare healing abilities over the course of the film. A former overachiever, she struggles with emotional trauma and feelings of being lost. Her healing powers are closely tied to her ability to confront her pain, specifically related to intergenerational trauma passed down through her family. Her journey is one of self-discovery, embracing her legacy, and healing not only herself but her community.
- Evelyn Iseda:
  - Essence's mother, Evelyn, is a former witch who abandoned magic due to a traumatic experience, leading to her strained relationship with The Collective and

her daughter. Evelyn is infected with wraithroot and refuses to let Essence heal her, fearing the toll it will take on her daughter and her distrust in magic. Her character represents the generational pain that Essence must confront, as Evelyn embodies avoidance and distrust of magic.

- Lula Mae Iseda:

- Essence's deceased grandmother, Lula Mae, was a powerful healer who bound her trauma in order to be a better witch. She appears as a guide to Essence in the In-Between, offering wisdom and helping her understand the family legacy. Lula Mae's character reflects the theme of intergenerational trauma and healing, as Essence must uncover the secrets and pain that Lula Mae hid to unlock her own potential.

- Phoenix Castillo (Nix)

- Nix is a brave, gender-ambiguous member of The Collective who saves Essence at a party, becoming her guide into the magical world. Nix is emotionally grounded, protective, and supportive of Essence as she navigates her powers. Nix's connection to Essence grows throughout the film, acting as both a protector and a potential love interest. Their powers are centered around defense and protection, making them physically and emotionally strong.

- Zuri Njoki

- Zuri is a member of The Collective who comes from a different lineage and is skeptical of Essence's abilities. She is conflicted because she was once romantically involved with Nix and feels threatened by Essence's arrival. Zuri's own healing powers are limited by her unresolved trauma, leading to tension

between her and Essence. Darker-skinned and experienced within The Collective, Zuri's journey is about confronting her own pain and accepting her place alongside Essence.

- Mai Santos
  - o Mai is Essence's best friend in the mortal world. She is carefree, sex-positive, and the life of the party, providing a stark contrast to Essence's more reserved and overachieving personality. Mai supports Essence emotionally, particularly when the weight of her new powers and responsibilities becomes overwhelming. Mai's lightheartedness brings balance to the story, offering moments of relief in a world filled with tension and magic.
- Soren
  - o Soren is a member of The Collective who suffers an episode or attack early in the story and is later stabilized by Essence's healing abilities. His character represents the dangers posed by wraithroot and the ongoing magical crisis. Soren has a deep relationship with Nix, and his illness serves as one of the catalysts that pushes Essence to understand her healing powers.
- Tala
  - o The Visionary or Seer on the council, Tala is an Indigenous and Black woman with the ability to see into the future. Her role is to provide spiritual guidance to the community, though her powers often burden her with knowledge of difficult truths. Tala creates the tea that helps Essence enter the In-Between and plays a pivotal role in guiding her through her journey of healing.
- Selene Sola

- The Innovator on The Collective's council, Selene is a trans woman who represents progress and adaptation within the magical community. Her powers revolve around modernizing ancient practices, blending tradition with new techniques. Selene serves as a supportive yet pragmatic voice on the council, offering guidance to Essence but also pushing her to act.
- Sable
  - Sable is the Protector on the council, a nonbinary woman with a powerful physical presence. Her role is to ensure the safety of The Collective and its members, embodying strength and defense. Sable is deeply invested in the community's survival and is both compassionate and tough when it comes to their duties. They are a grounding force within The Collective and offer practical wisdom.
- Adelina
  - Adelina is The Elder on the council, representing tradition and the preservation of knowledge within The Collective. As the eldest member, she is deeply rooted in the old ways of magic and carries the weight of history and responsibility. Adelina's role is to maintain balance between the past and the future, guiding the younger members like Essence with wisdom and patience. She plays a crucial part in helping Essence understand the significance of her healer lineage, though her adherence to tradition sometimes puts her at odds with the more progressive members of the council, like Selene.

## 5 CONCLUSION

Movies do not merely offer us the opportunity to reimagine the culture we most intimately know on the screen, they make culture.

—bell hooks, *Reel to Reel: Race, Class and Sex at the Movies*

In television, film, and media, narratives have historically played a powerful role in shaping and reinforcing societal and political views, particularly scripting the identities of marginalized groups like Black and Afro-Latina women into narrow and often harmful stereotypes. These depictions are ingrained within the historically driven archetypes of the Strong Black Woman, which are often embedded in other tropes such as the Jezebel, Mammy, Matriarch, Sapphire, and more, leaving little to no room for narratives of vulnerability, plurality, and healing. In contrast, *Incongruous* stands as a creative exploration whose primary objective is to challenge these prevailing portrayals of Black and Afro-Latina women by injecting a narrative that centers their experiences of healing, self-reclamation, spiritual transformation, and vulnerability. This project utilizes soul retrieval work as a powerful mechanism for reclaiming this agency, offering a counter-narrative to the reductive depictions so often seen on screen. By weaving together themes of trauma recovery, intergenerational healing, and intersectional identities, *Incongruous* seeks to fill a much-needed gap in the representation of Black and Afro-Latina women, where plurality and vulnerability are not only acknowledged but celebrated.

This starts in pre-production, grounded in research and writing, as every TV show and movie is orchestrated and conceptualized from the backbones of a script or screenplay. In the creation of this project, key insights on the portrayal of trauma, identity, and healing in media became essential foundations to challenge current Hollywood conventions. By bridging scholarly work in Black feminist thought, Chicana studies, and critical film theory, this project creates a

narrative that merges artistic expression with lived theory, reimagining the relationship between film and society. Through decolonial practices of spiritual healing, specifically soul retrieval work, *Incongruous* offers a direct approach to addressing the needs of Black and Afro-Latina women survivors of Child Sexual Abuse. Aligning these women's stories with the complex layers of intersectionality and *nepantla* shifts the focus from one-dimensional depictions of strength to a narrative that explores emotional depth, healing, and transformation. Thus, *Essence Iseda* becomes a vehicle through which we can see the interplay between trauma, identity, and the journey toward spiritual and personal reclamation. These themes, when situated within the narrative structure of a screenplay, demonstrate film's potential not just to represent marginalized identities but to actively participate in their healing.

The broader significance of this piece offers a new paradigm for how women of color are depicted in fantasy and drama films, introducing the possibilities for these narratives to center healing rather than conflict, and reclamation rather than suffering. This offers an essential counter-narrative in an industry that historically replicates harmful ideologies and narratives of the oppressed. Additionally, this project provides a framework for how spirituality, specifically within the realm of *nepantla*, can be leveraged as a means of exploring identity, survival, and restoration on screen.

While *Incongruous* provides an alternative narrative that challenges conventional representations, it is important to acknowledge the limitations inherent in this creative thesis. One limitation lies in the constraints of the fantasy genre, which can sometimes veer into tropes and conventions that risk diluting the project's central messages. In navigating the beats of this narrative—composed from a thread of personal experiences, research, and testimonies—was demanding, particularly given the focus on spiritual healing. Currently, film often uses trauma as

a tool to build character rather than facilitating transformation, which was a core tension in the conceptualization of this project. Another limitation is the subjective nature of healing itself, as the script presents one possible route toward spiritual and emotional recovery, which may not resonate with all survivors or communities.

As this project progresses, I aim to further research and implore on the ways in which intersecting themes of healing, spirituality, and cultural resilience, particularly how women and children of color, can navigate pre-colonial cultural practices and transformative justice frameworks to redefine strength and resilience in the face of violence. Additionally, future iterations could incorporate native and Indigenous languages across the Black diaspora. There is also potential to explore how these themes might extend beyond fictional storytelling into other mediums, like documentary filmmaking, to offer even broader perspectives on these themes.

In *Incongruous*, the central focus is on healing, spiritual transformation, and the reclamation of self for Black and Afro-Latina women. The story is more than just a narrative; it is an offering to those who have long been excluded from the genre of fantasy and drama, showing that their stories, too, belong in the realm of magic, resilience, and recovery. As bell hooks reminds us, cinema not only reflects culture but shapes it. Thus, through *Incongruous*, we offer a vision of the culture we want to see: one where healing is at the forefront.

**APPENDIX**

Incongruous

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EXT. FOREST - IN-BETWEEN (DREAM) - TWILIGHT

The field stretches endlessly under a falling horizon, where shadows of the forest blur into the fading light. Three young girls—each from a different time—run together, fingers laced. They move as one, skirts flowing as they glide over roots and brush, their laughter and joy rippling through the quiet.

The smallest girl, barely six, clings tightly to the others. Her wide eyes take in the scene with wonder, and cheeks flushed with delight as she grips their hands.

Beside her, the preteen—taller and sure-footed—matches her pace, a gentle confidence in her stride. Her gaze shifts protectively between the youngest and oldest, as though anchoring the group.

The middle child, a year or two younger than the preteen, moves with quiet grace. She wears a steady, thoughtful expression as though carrying a weight. Her hand holds fast to the others, bound in unity.

A montage unfolds in quiet, fleeting moments:

--The girl's twirl in circles, skirts fanning out as they spin under the soft, dimming light; their laughter rises, gentle but piercing through the quiet of the endless field.

--They weave through patches of tall grass, ducking under branches, the youngest girl stumbling and giggling as the other two steady her.

--Purple flowers scatter across the ground, their vibrant petals glistening. The girls pick the flowers, twining them together in crowns.

--Then—a faint creaking sounds, muffled at first but persistent, echoing from somewhere beyond the field. The youngest girl's steps falter, her fingers loosening from the other's grasp. The other two remain engrossed in the moment of play, their laughter unbroken.

INT. ENCLOSED SPACE - IN-BETWEEN (DREAM) - MOMENTS LATER

Inside an enclosed space, a narrow sliver of the outside forest is visible through a crack. The youngest girl steps closer, drawn to the rhythmic creaking, the sound crescendoing, reverberating within the darkened space. She halts, her breath catching as a faint whisper calls her name.

EXT. FOREST - IN-BETWEEN (DREAM) - TWILIGHT - MOMENTS LATER

At the forest's edge, seated on a moss-covered stump, an elderly woman watches. Her eyes, dark and thoughtful, follow the girl's movements with a serene, knowing expression. Threads of silver catch in her hair, illuminated softly by the dying light. She smiles, a warmth in her gaze as she observes them.

The creaking sound intensifies, resonating with a hollow, rhythmic pulse. It summons the youngest girl alone, who shifts her feet towards the haunting sound.

The elderly woman's gaze shifts, her eyes lifting toward ESSENCE ISEDA, the bystander amongst the field. Their eyes meet, and the elderly woman stands, raising her hand in a gentle beckon.

ELDERLY WOMAN

Essence...

The call echoes, tender yet urging note, drifting over the field, as the creaking stirs.

Montage Ends.

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Essence jolts awake, her breath sharp and uneven. She's slumped over her easel, paint smudged on her cheek and hands, her clothes rumpled from sleep.

A faint silver glow from the full moon seeps in through the windows, casting long shadows across the floor, mingling with the clutter of paint tubes, brushes, and half-finished canvases. Scattered sketches and reference photos lie nearby, each one echoing surreal landscapes and mystical figures. A cold mug of coffee sits to the side, next to a phone resting face-down on a paint-splattered table. The painting before her—a vague, half-formed scene of figures in a field—resembles her dream in muted tones, with shadowed edges creeping in.

Then, the subtle sound of a key turns, a bolt unlocks, and the abrupt creak of the door erupts through the space as hurried footsteps approach. Essence barely has a moment to react before—

MAI (O.S.)

(cheerfully)

Ess! Essence! Close your eyes!

Mai bursts in, grinning, arms full of balloons and a large, wrapped gift. She flicks on the light with her elbow as she makes her way in.

Essence blinks through her sleepy haze, rubbing her eyes before staring at Mai, who kicks the door closed with her foot.

ESSENCE

That key was for emergencies, Mai.

MAI

(scowling)

I said close your eyes! Besides, it *is* an emergency! You didn't pick up your phone.

Essence glances at her phone, realizing it's dead. She reaches for the charger, plugging it in. It powers on, displaying several calls and missed texts from MAI SANTOS.

MAI

See? Total emergency! Also, happy almost birthday, my sweet, sweet, amazing best friend in the whole wide world.

Mai looks at her dainty wristwatch and Essence shifts her gaze to the items in Mai's hands.

ESSENCE

Mai, it's like...the middle of the night.

MAI

(rolling her eyes)

Excuses, excuses. You're always staying up for that art of yours. And, obviously, I couldn't let you sit here on the eve of your birthday without a proper celebration.

ESSENCE

(smiling)

Thanks, Mai.

Essence reaches for the gift, but Mai pulls away.

MAI

Ah, ah, ah. It's not quite midnight yet!

ESSENCE

Oh, come on. You've already barged in, so eager to give me

Essence seizes it playfully.

MAI

You're right, I can't wait another second! Open it, open it!

Essence unwraps the box, revealing a handmade photo album. On the cover, a collage of old photos and doodles Mai has meticulously pieced together. She flips through the pages, her grin widening as she sees snapshots from their years together laughing, pulling faces, little moments captured through the years.

ESSENCE

Oh wow, we were babies.

MAI

(grinning, softer)

I hope you love it...I figured it was time to put all our craziness in one place.

She flips through a couple more pictures—sleepovers, road trips, shared moments of laughter. Mai steps in, standing beside her.

MAI

Like, look, do you remember that time we went to 6th grade camp?

ESSENCE

How could I possibly forget? That was the day you accepted my friendship.

MAI

Pause, we don't need to talk about *that* part.

They flip through a couple more pages.

ESSENCE

Wait a minute, is this the first day we met?

MAI

Oh yeah! You mean when you wouldn't leave me alone?

ESSENCE

Mai...

Essence's smile falters, her gaze dropping to the pages. In the mix of joy, there's a flicker of something distant in her eyes.

MAI

You love it, don't you?

Mai looks up at Essence, catching the change in Essence's mood.

MAI

You okay?

ESSENCE

Yeah, it's just...I hardly remember anything before moving...so, thank you for this. I-I love it, Mai.

MAI

You could *never* forget me...your soul would remember even if your mind didn't.

Mai smiles softly as Essence embraces her eldest friend.

ESSENCE

Alright, alright, that's enough nostalgia. You got me sentimental here.

MAI

Don't worry, we're just getting started. This little trip down memory lane? It's only the beginning.

ESSENCE

What do you mean?

Mai straightens, a mischievous grin spreading across her face.

MAI

Well, I couldn't just leave you here to mope with your paints all night. I've got one more surprise, but it requires...a little more pizzazz.

Essence raises an eyebrow as Mai pulls out a glittery makeup bag.

ESSENCE

No...

MAI

Yes!

Mai laces her fingers with Essence's, dragging her into the bedroom, the bag heavy with makeup product under her arm as she scrolls for the perfect playlist.

INT. BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Mai enters the bedroom like she owns the place, tossing her make-up bag on the neatly made bed. With a swift move, she turns on the Bluetooth speaker, setting the tune as she grabs a razor off Essence's dresser.

MAI

Chop, chop. We got a party to tend to!

ESSENCE

Really, do I have to?

MAI

Are you kidding me? Ess, come on. You're covered in day-old paint. You're not going to the party I planned you looking like you just rolled out of bed. Besides, I have the perfect outfit to show off those legs of yours.

Mai winks as she hands Essence the razor, turning up the tunes to hint at the conversation ending as she points to the bathroom.

INT. BATHROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Essence stands at the tub, a resigned look on her face as she lathers her legs, razor in hand. From outside, Mai's playlist pumps up the energy, her occasional off-key singing filtering through the door.

Essence carefully runs the razor over her skin, rolling her eyes as she hears Mai rummaging through drawers and planning every detail of the night out. Just as she's finishing up, she nicks herself, wincing slightly.

ESSENCE  
(muttering to self)  
Always with the great ideas, Mai.

Essence reaches for a tissue, but when she turns back to wipe the cut, it's gone. She blinks, confused, running her fingers over the spot where the blood had been. Her brow furrows, but she shrugs it off, taking her blade to the last strip.

INT. BEDROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Essence reenters, towel wrapped around her, rubbing her leg where she cut herself. Mai's stationed at the foot of the bed, surrounded by an assortment of makeup, shoes, and a couple of outfits laid out—a shimmering dress and a sleek jumpsuit, each handpicked with Essence in mind.

MAI  
Oh my gawd, who is that? Is that my  
bestie? Gee, I hardly recognize her  
without all the paint.

Essence makes a face as she rolls her eyes, laughing.

ESSENCE  
Whatever, Mai. Let's make this quick.

Essence sits on the edge of the bed.

MAI  
You might hate me after this...but hey,  
every artist needs her canvas, right?

Mai holds up a wax strip and tweezers.

ESSENCE

Oh no...not you turning me into your art project.

MAI

When I'm done with you, you'll be my masterpiece.

Mai places the wax strip on Essence's upper lip, smoothing it out.

ESSENCE

Ok, ok, make it quick.

Mai quickly pulls off the strip.

MAI

Beauty is pain...or whatever our mamas said.

ESSENCE

Oh, good gawd, the joys of being Latina...

Essence holds her index finger to her upper lip as Mai wastes no time, going in with the tweezers on Essence's eyebrows.

MAI

Hold still now.

A quick montage unfolds—Mai's expert hands at work:

--Mai's hand selects a glimmering eyeshadow palette, and her finger hovers before picking a bold shade. She dabs the brush into the powder, tapping it to release a cloud of shimmer.

--A brush sweeps across Essence's eyelids, depositing the shade in a smooth stroke. Essence blinks, her eyes catching the hint of sparkle in the light.

--Mai's fingers work a curl as she twists and sets it in place with the diffuser.

--A pair of earrings dangle as Mai fastens them on Essence's earlobes, the gemstones glinting faintly in the dim light.

--Mai's fingers glide a highlighter stick along Essence's cheekbones, the sheen adding a subtle radiance as it catches the moonlight filtering in through the window.

--Essence's hand smooths down the fabric of the jumpsuit, the material gleaming under the light, each fold settling perfectly against her form.

--A swipe of lipstick over her lips, the color deep and rich, leaving a confident finish.

Laughter erupts, the music's beat syncing with each flick of the brush, and the gentle hum of the nearby speaker amplifies the transformation's energy.

End Montage.

Essence stands in front of the mirror, now fully dressed, her reflection showing a polished, radiant version of herself she hasn't seen in a long time. She takes a deep breath, staring back at her own transformation with a mix of amusement and awe.

MAI

What do you think?

ESSENCE

(mouth agape)

I think...it's been a very long time no see.

MAI

What I'd tell ya, a masterpiece in disguise.

EXT. HOUSE - NIGHT

The house glows from the inside, lights spilling out onto the front lawn, pulsing slightly to the beat of the music

thumping from within. Essence and Mai approach the front door, and the sounds of laughter and distant music grow louder, filling the quiet night.

MAI

I know I ruined the surprise-

Mai pushes a curl back into place on Essence's head.

ESSENCE

You normally do...

MAI

Hey! Besides the point. Just...promise you'll still act surprised?

ESSENCE

For you? Anything.

MAI

Ok, but seriously. Surprise. Because you're face usually says otherwise.

Essence looks at Mai appalled.

INT. HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Mai pushes open the door, revealing a bustling, noisy room filled with familiar faces. Friends are scattered across the room, laughing, chatting, and dancing. As they spot Essence, someone shouts.

FRIEND #1

She's here!

The room erupts with cheers and a chorus vibrates through the home.

CROWD

Happy Birthday!

Essence takes in the scene, her smile widening as her friends rush over to hug her.

Mai disappears beyond the crowd, turning to look back as she mouths ACT SURPRISED.

FRIEND #2

Finally! Thought you'd never get here!

ESSENCE

Yeah, blame Mai. She took her sweet time turning me into her "masterpiece."

The crowd laughs, and Mai rolls her eyes.

MAI

Hey, some of us work hard to make you look good!

Essence chuckles.

FRIEND #3  
(raising their cup)  
To Essence!

The crowd cheers again.

ESSENCE  
Thank you, guys. Seriously, this means  
a lot.

The music pulses louder, and a few friends start pulling Essence towards the center, cheering her on to join in on the dancing. Essence hesitates for a moment, her cheeks flushed.

ESSENCE  
I'm going to get my celebratory drink  
first.

Essence weaves through the crowd, finding the makeshift bar. She pours herself a drink, looking around, giving warm smiles.

Her phone buzzes.

Essence pulls her phone from her pocket, the screen lighting up with a notification for a new voicemail from her parents. Taking a deep breath, she steps aside and walks out the back door.

EXT. BACKYARD - CONTINUOUS

Essence holds the phone up to her ear, the party humming inside.

EVELYN (O.S.)  
Hey, baby girl...happy birthday! Your  
dad and I wanted to call earlier, but  
we figured you'd be out celebrating...  
Thought maybe we could make you a cake  
this weekend or...whenever you want to  
visit.  
We miss you, Essence.

EVELYN  
We miss you, Essence.

LEO  
We miss you, puchis.

Essence's smile softens, her eyes reflecting a hint of longing as she listens to her parent's voice.

EVELYN

Call us when you get the chance, okay?  
There's something I want to talk to you  
about. We love-

Before she can finish listening, someone taps her on the shoulder. Essence looks up to see **DEVON**, her ex-boyfriend. Her breath leaves her for a moment, her eyes widening. Devon stands tall, his stride always overconfident, with a grin that feels too practiced, revealing perfectly straight teeth. He holds a drink in his hand.

DEVON

Essence! Thought you'd be dancing by  
now. Don't tell me you're starting the  
night off all serious!

Essence forces a tight smile, quickly ending the voicemail and slipping her phone into her pocket. Her shoulders tense, and she straightens, steeling herself.

ESSENCE

Actually, I'm just about to join Mai-

DEVON

Mai can wait. Come on, it's your  
birthday! Thought I could share a drink  
with the birthday girl, see how you've  
been doing.

ESSENCE

I'm good, Devon. I got...a lot of  
guests to catch up with.

Essence slides past Devon, entering the party.

INT. HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Devon follows, taking a swallow of his drink.

DEVON

Come on Essy, don't be like that. We're  
just making small talk. You know, it's  
nice to see you.

Essence's jaw clenches at the nickname he used to call her.

ESSENCE

I can't say the same.

Essence keeps walking away but Devon shifts, placing himself in front of her, his large frame blocking her path. He grabs her arm, his grip firm, too firm. Essence freezes for a moment, her breath catching again.

DEVON

Essence, how many times do I have to apologize for—

Essence pulls slightly but his grip tightens, her voice steady, yet sharp.

ESSENCE

Devon, I suggest you let me go. Now.

Devon chuckles, his fingers still gripping her arm.

DEVON

Come on, you need to let that go. I've changed. You know I didn't mean—

A voice cuts through, calm but with an edge.

NIX (O.C.)

Everything okay here?

Devon turns, his expression tightening as he sizes up the **NIX**, short for **PHOENIX CASTILLO**, who stands a few feet away, watching with a steady gaze. Nix's appearance is striking: gender ambiguous, a mix of both feminine and masculine expression. They wear a loose button-up shirt paired with fitted pants and sturdy boots. Tattoos peek from under their sleeves, and a facial piercing glints in the light. Their confidence radiates as they lock eyes with Devon.

DEVON

Maybe you should move along and mind your business.

NIX

From what I heard, she said let go, pal.

Devon's grip on Essence's arm tightens briefly before he lets go, turning his full attention to Nix. His face twists with anger, the alcohol amplifying his frustration.

DEVON

(sneering)

Yeah? I don't recall anyone asking for a hero. Who the hell do you think you are?

NIX

Just someone with clear hearing apparently. Might be time for you to move on.

DEVON

You have a lot of nerve—

ESSENCE

Devon, just go home. Who even invited you?

But Devon, fueled by anger and alcohol, ignores her, jabbing a finger toward Nix.

NIX

Uninvited and hard of hearing. Quite the mix, I see.

DEVON

You got jokes, tough guy. Let's see if you can back it up.

Before Essence can intervene, Devon swings a fist at Nix. Nix dodges the blow, narrowly avoiding the punch, but another follows.

Essence tries to step back, losing her footing in the process. As she stumbles, Nix becomes distracted, reaching to steady her. In that split second, Devon's fist connects with Nix's brow, the skin breaking. Nix barely staggers, their eyes narrowing, fists balling as though to retaliate.

Devon charges once more, but Nix grabs his fist with ease, deflecting the punch. They twist Devon's arm behind his back, their movements quick and controlled.

DEVON

Let me go!

NIX

Will you walk away?

Devon nods stiffly. Around them, a few partygoers have started to glance over, some watching with interest while others exchange curious, wary glances.

Nix lets him go and he storms off.

Essence's eyes remain on Nix, her gaze drifting to the fresh cut on their brow, where a trickle of blood has started to run. Nix, brushing themselves off, catches her stare and offers a slight smirk, attempting to shake off the tension.

ESSENCE

You're bleeding.

Nix wipes the blood from their brow, shrugging slightly, though they wince as they touch the wound.

NIX

I'd do it again—for you, or anyone.

ESSENCE

The least I can do is patch you up...or at least know who I'm thanking.

Nix catches the hint in her words, smirking slightly.

NIX

The name's Nix.

ESSENCE

Well, Nix, thank you for stepping in.  
I'm Essence.

Essence smiles, extending her. Nix glances down at it, then back up to meet her big brown eyes. A smile forms as they take her hand.

NIX

The birthday girl, it's a pleasure.

Essence pulls them toward the kitchen.

INT. KITCHEN - NIGHT

Soft light bounces off the tiled counters as Essence rummages through drawers and cabinets. Nix leans against the counter, holding a towel to their injured brow, watching her silently. She finally pulls out a small first aid kit.

ESSENCE

Ah, here we go.

Essence approaches Nix with the kit, her expression softening as she opens it and pulls some out antiseptic and a Band-Aid.

NIX

Do you know what you're doing?

Essence glares up at Nix, moving only her eyes upward.

ESSENCE

I offered, didn't I? Now hold still.  
This might sting a bit.

Nix chuckles, the sound low and comforting.

NIX

I think I can handle it.

Essence steps in closer, her brow furrowed in concentration as she carefully dabs the antiseptic on Nix's wound. Nix winces slightly, but their eyes never leave her face.

ESSENCE

Sorry...

NIX

I've had worse.

They share a brief smile before Essence peels the back off a small Band-Aid. She leans in as close as she can, her fingers lightly brushing Nix's skin as she presses it over the cut. Her hand hovers just a fraction too long, and that's when it happens—a soft lilac glow emanates from beneath her fingertips.

Essence doesn't notice, too focused on smoothing the Band-Aid, but Nix does. Their eyes soften, a sense of calm washing over them. Nix doesn't react, not surprised in the slightest. They watch Essence carefully, saying nothing, allowing the moment to pass unspoken. The lavender glow fades as quickly as it appears.

Just then, Mai comes barging in.

MAI  
(brightly, holding two  
drinks)  
Hey, I've been looking for you!

Essence turns, startled, while Nix stays composed. Mai pauses, taking in the scene. Mai blinks, realizing she might be interrupting something.

MAI  
(playfully smirking)  
Ooh, don't mind me. Just...you know,  
finding my bestie, my friend.

She wiggles the drinks in her hand with a knowing grin, but steps back, giving them space.

ESSENCE  
(a little flustered)  
Uh, hey Mai...I was just...patching Nix  
up. Have you met Nix?

Nix gives a soft, amused smile at the exchange but remains quiet, lifting their hand in a gentle wave to Mai, their eyes never leaving Essence.

MAI  
(grinning, teasing)  
Mhmm. Well, whenever you're done  
playing nurse, you know where to find  
me...or don't.

She winks at Essence, backing out of the kitchen with a giggle, leaving them alone again.

Essence shakes her head, her cheeks flushing as she steps back.

ESSENCE  
There...you're all patched up.

Nix touches the Band-Aid and no longer winces. They glance up at Essence, offering a quiet, knowing smile.

NIX  
(softly)  
You've got a healing touch.

Essence beams softly. Before the moment can stretch further, Nix's gaze drifts toward the party, their calm demeanor unwavering.

NIX

A couple of us are heading out soon for a bite. Would you like to join? Could be fun.

ESSENCE

(shyly)

I should find Mai.

NIX

What if I need my nurse? You know, I could have a concussion.

Essence laughs, the tension easing but she remains unsure. She looks out at the party, seeing Mai in the middle of the crowd dancing.

ESSENCE

(half-smiling)

It does look like Mai is having a good time...I don't think she'll miss me too much.

This time, Nix extends their hand and Essence takes it.

EXT. PARTY HOUSE - NIGHT

Essence and Nix step out into the cool air. The muffled sound of music fades as they walk down the driveway. A car pulls up with Nix's friends inside—**SOREN**, **LUCE**, and **MALIK**. They are a rowdy bunch, laughing and shouting out the window.

MALIK

Finally, Nix, I'm starvin'.

SOREN

(slurred)

Man, we've been waitin' for you.

LUCE

(scoffing/concerned)

Phoenix, what the hell happened?

Nix grins, waving at them before opening the passenger door for Essence.

NIX  
That's a long story, guys. This is  
Essence, she'll be joining us.

She smiles, but hesitates, her hand hovering mid-air as she glances at the car's cramped interior. Soren hangs his head out the passenger window, a simper on his sweaty and slightly pale face.

ESSENCE  
(to Nix, softly)  
Can we walk? I'm kind  
of...claustrophobic.

Nix, caught off guard for a second, processes the request. Without further thought, they close the door, turning back to her with an easy smile.

NIX  
Yeah, no worries. We can walk. One  
second.

Essence smiles, relieved and she takes a step away from the curb. Nix turns back to the car and leans into the window.

NIX  
(to Soren)  
You hanging in there?

Soren nods, a burp building in his throat as he waves Nix's concern away.

MALIK  
We've got our eye on him.

LUCE  
(quietly, curious)  
Is that her?

Luce looks beyond Nix, eyeing Essence up and down in awe.

NIX  
(nodding gently)  
We'll see you in a bit. Make sure you  
get a good booth.

Nix steps back, tapping the roof of the car lightly as it pulls off down the street.

NIX

Shall we?

Nix smiles and motions with a sweep of their arm, gesturing for Essence to go first.

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

The city has grown quiet as Essence and Nix stroll along the sidewalk, the sound of their footsteps soft against the pavement. Their laughter consumes them as they banter and tease one another.

NIX

Claustrophobic huh? I would've never guessed. You seem like you can handle anything.

Essence laughs, shaking her head.

ESSENCE

Yeah, anything but tight, small, and enclosed spaces. I think it stems from my childhood.

NIX

No, I get it, we all have our weaknesses.

ESSENCE

Yeah? What's yours?

NIX

I don't know if I can trust you with that information just yet.

Essence slows her pace, stopping momentarily under a streetlamp.

ESSENCE

(teasing)

Okay, but seriously, what's with all the mystery?

Nix chuckles, avoiding the question with a grin.

NIX

I guess you'll have to wait and solve  
it, huh?

Nix looks into Essence's eyes and she holds their gaze, her  
voice softening.

ESSENCE

Is it worth the while?

Nix's smile fades slightly, replaced by something more sincere.  
They step closer, their voice quiet, but with a spark of  
playfulness.

NIX

We'll just have to believe in the  
magic.

Essence lingers for a second, caught in the moment, before  
retracting.

ESSENCE

Come on, we don't want to keep your  
friends waiting.

The two continue their pace, rounding the corner.

EXT. DINER - NIGHT

Essence and Nix reach the small, cozy diner. The neon sign  
buzzes in the night.

INT. DINER - NIGHT

As they open the door, the little bell above the door chimes.  
Inside, they can see Malik and Luce sitting in a booth, but  
Soren isn't doing well—his head is down on the table, his face  
pale, and beads of sweat dot his forehead. Essence and Nix  
approach the booth.

LUCE

(concerned)

Phoenix, something's not right. He's  
worse than before.

Nix's expression changes in an instant, their playful demeanor  
vanishing as they hurry toward Soren, taking a seat.

NIX

Soren, hey, how are you doing, bud?

Soren doesn't respond. Nix lifts his head slightly, and Essence sees it—Soren's lips are stained black. Essence's eyes widen in alarm.

ESSENCE

(gasping)

His lips...

Without hesitation, Nix and Malik strip Soren of his jacket, revealing his arms covered in thick, black veins, like dark roots spreading beneath his skin. Soren's body trembles, his breathing shallow and uneven. The three exchange a quick, tense glance.

LUCE

(in disbelief)

It can't be...

MALIK

(grim & ghostly)

He's got wraithroot.

ESSENCE

What are you talking about? What's happening to him? He needs *help*. Hell, he needs a hospital.

NIX

(quickly)

We need to stop this before it spreads any further.

ESSENCE

(panicking)

We need to call 911!

Essence pulls out her phone, but before she can dial, Nix springs to their feet, stopping her hand mid-motion.

NIX

Essence, this is beyond your world.

Essence stares at Nix, her breath catching, but before she can respond, Malik's voice cuts through.

MALIK

If it reaches his heart, it's over.

LUCE

(voice breaking)

We're going to lose him.

Nix stands firm, eyes locked on Essence. Meanwhile, Malik and Luce move in swiftly, working together, pulling Soren's body upright. Soren convulses violently, his body jerking with every breath as the black veins pulse beneath his skin.

LUCE

(to Nix)

Phoenix, is it *her*?

NIX

(calm but firm)

Essence, I need you to listen very closely. You come from a lineage of witches, to be specific, healers. You can heal Soren.

Essence steps back, her eyes wide with disbelief, shaking her head.

ESSENCE

(stammering)

What? You're not serious...

Nix steps closer, meeting her eyesight by bending down.

NIX

Wait, look. I can prove it.

Nix carefully removes the bandage from their injured brow, revealing smooth, healthy skin where a deep gash once was. Essence stares at the uninjured skin, her hand instinctively lifting toward Nix's face, but she stops herself before making contact.

ESSENCE

(whispering)

How...that's not possible...

Suddenly, Soren seizes, a thick stream of black tar dripping from his lips.

MALIK

(urgently)

We're running out of time. If we don't act now, it'll reach his heart.

Essence's gaze flickers between Nix, Malik, Luce, and the convulsing Soren. Her breathing quickens, panic tightening her chest as she places a hand over her heart, a high-pitched ringing filling her ears.

ESSENCE

(voice trembling)

I don't even know what I did, Nix.

NIX

(calm, but urgent)

Tell me you don't feel it...the magic. That sudden rush of warmth coursing through your veins. Lean into it, listen to it.

Essence stares at Nix, her mind reeling. She closes her eyes, taking a deep breath to try and regulate herself. The ringing in her ear intensifies, reaching a crescendo, when she hears it—a voice, soft but steady, and oddly familiar.

VOICE (V.O.)

Lay him down.

ESSENCE

(calm, certain)

Put him on the ground. Now.

Nix and Malik exchange a brief glance but follow her lead. They gently lower Soren onto the ground, laying him flat as his body twitches with another convulsion. Essence kneels beside him, her movements feeling natural.

ESSENCE

(whispering to herself)

I can do this...I can do this...

Essence gets on her knees, hovering over Soren. A soft lilac glow begins to emanate from her palms, and her breathing stabilizes.

ESSENCE

Someone, hold his head, please.

Luce moves quickly, cradling Soren's head. The lilac glow intensifies, and the voice calls out again, soft but clear.

VOICE (V.O.)

Repeat after me...

Essence closes her eyes, concentrating as she listens closely.

ESSENCE

By the roots that bind, by the  
bloodline's grace, bring forth  
healing, through time and space.

VOICE (V.O.)

By the roots that bind, by the  
bloodline's grace, bring forth  
healing, through time and space.

Essence whispers the words, repeating them, her voice trembling at first but growing stronger as she feels the magic build within her. The lilac glow intensifies, pulsing around Soren's chest. The black veins begin to retract, his color slowly returning, his breath stabilizing, but the black veins don't disappear fully.

MALIK

(whispering in awe)

She's doing it...

LUCE

(softly)

Come on, Soren...

Soren's body relaxes, the convulsions passing. His eyes flutter open, still hazy and unfocused, but his lips part as he whispers hoarsely.

SOREN

I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner...

Soren's voice fades as his energy wanes. He passes out, his body going limp. Nix places two fingers on his wrist, checking his pulse, their expression serious but relieved.

Essence opens her eyes, the ringing in her ear finally stopping as the lilac glow fades from her fingers. She hunches over, breathing heavily, exhaustion setting in.

NIX

See, what I'd tell you, you have a  
healing touch.

Nix winks at Essence, making light of the situation. Malik and them lift Soren, each taking one arm each as they balance him between them. His body is limp and slouched over.

MALIK

Luce, you got this?

LUCE

(nodding & determined)

You know it. Just make sure you've got  
Soren.

Luce turns away from the group, walking toward the other people in the diner, ready to do what needs to be done—erase their memories.

Nix, now holding Soren's weight, glances back at Essence as they head toward the door.

NIX

(calm & steady)

You coming?

ESSENCE

Where?

Essence hesitates for a moment, still catching her breath as she looks up at Nix.

NIX

To solve the mystery, of course?

Nix beams, holding the door open, a glint of excitement in their eyes.

Essence rises to her feet, dusting off her palms and clothes. She steps forward, her movements slow and deliberate. Before she crosses the threshold, she looks back at the diner.

Inside, Luce's lips move, mumbling a speech she can't quite decipher, her hands raised, poised vertically, one above the other. The few stragglers and workers left inside are caught in a daze, their eyes unfocused and distant, caught under Luce's spell.

ESSENCE

What is she doing?

NIX

She's helping them forget-memory spell.  
It's kind of her niche.

Essence watches Luce's quiet control for a moment longer, her hands moving subtly. As she turns away, Essence steps out of the diner, hearing the chime sing as the door shuts behind them.

EXT. DINER - NIGHT

Nix, now back to supporting Soren's weight with Malik, leads them into the cool night. The full moon hangs high in the sky, casting shadows across the quiet, abandoned street. A gentle breeze stirs the fallen leaves, sending them into a flurry.

They walk for a moment, but instead of continuing down the street, Nix stops in a secluded spot just beyond the diner. Essence looks around, a bit on edge.

NIX

Essence, do you mind?

Nix glances at Soren, then back at Essence, wiggling free from Soren's weight.

ESSENCE

(blinking, confused)  
Oh, uh, yeah...sure.

Essence steps forward, taking Soren's spare arm, feeling his weight shift onto her. She glances toward Nix, curiosity piqued.

ESSENCE

What are we doing?

MALIK

(grinning)  
You'll see. Hold tight.

Nix turns away from them, cracking their knuckles and clearing their throat with a deep, low rumble. Essence watches closely, not blinking as Nix raises their palms.

NIX

Brace yourself.

With a quick motion, Nix raises their palms. The air before them ripples. The once gentle breeze shifts violently, turning into a vacuum that pulls everything in. A shimmer manifests, intensifying instantly like heat waves rising from the pavement on a scorching day. Essence's breath catches as she watches intently. Within seconds, the ripple expands, and a portal forms—glowing with an ethereal, swirling light.

ESSENCE

(awe-struck)

You've got to show me how to do that.

Nix gives a playful smirk as they trade places with Essence, once again supporting Soren's weight.

NIX

(teasing)

You're not the only one with tricks up their sleeve.

MALIK

(firm but calm)

Time to go.

Malik takes the lead, pulling Soren and Nix along as they enter the swirling light of the portal. It swallows them whole, their figures vanishing right before her eyes. She takes a deep breath before stepping in behind them.

She is enveloped by the swirling light, the alleyway empty once more as the portal closes instantly after them.

EXT. THE HAVEN - NIGHT

The moment Essence crosses through the portal, the familiar city street dissolves, replaced by an old stone path lined with gnarled trees. Ahead, the Haven looms before her—its ivy-covered stone walls nearly blending into the surrounding forest. Nix and Malik are already far ahead, their silhouettes disappearing into the entrance of the foreign building.

Essence pauses for a moment as she takes in her new surroundings. The entrance glows, a warm golden light beckoning her forward. She steps toward the Haven with a sense of urgency.

INT. THE HAVEN - NIGHT

As soon as Essence steps inside, she's greeted by the sight of witches tending to Soren. His body is laid out on a table, and the room is filled with quiet murmurs as they work to stabilize him.

One member checks his pulse, her brow furrowing as she notices something strange.

MEMBER 1  
(whispering to herself)  
That...that's not possible.

Another member overhears and steps closer, inspecting Soren's arm. The black veins, once spreading uncontrollably, have receded and appear to be gray. The members exchange concerned glances, suspicion growing in the room.

MEMBER 2  
Was Zuri with you?

Just as they speak, **ZURI NJOKU** (24) comes running down the hall, her footsteps echoing. The room falls silent, all eyes turning toward her. Her presence commands attention, and her expression is assertive and focused.

ZURI  
(assertive)  
Who healed him?

The tension in the room thickens as all eyes shift toward Nix. Without a word, Nix turns their gaze to Essence. Slowly, the entire room follows, their eyes landing on Essence's unfamiliar face. She freezes, shifting uncomfortably under the weight of their stares, smiling sheepishly.

Whispers ripple through the room, disbelief and awe mixing in hushed tones.

MEMBER 3  
It can't be...

MEMBER 4  
Her...?

MEMBER 5  
Another healer?

The whispers grow louder, the realization spreading like wildfire as the members of the Collective try to comprehend. The room hums as the members exchange glances. Zuri's sharp gaze narrows on Essence.

ZURI  
(to Nix)  
Another healer? Is this true?

Essence opens her mouth to speak but nothing comes out. She's overwhelmed. Before she can gather herself, a figure steps forward. It's SABLE, a council member of the collective who commands immediate attention and silences the room. Her voice cuts through the newfound silence.

SABLE  
What's your name?

ESSENCE  
Essence...Essence Iseda.

Essence stands tall, trying to steady her voice, though it wavers for just a moment.

A gasp falls through the crowd. Sable pauses, letting the name hang in the air. Her sharp gaze assesses the weight of those words. The silence becomes so stagnant it feels as though the air has thickened. Sable turns, stiffly.

SABLE  
(firmly)  
Summon the council. Now!

In an instant, the room bursts into a flurry of motion as members rush to comply with Sable's order. Some return to their quarters, while others, still tending to Soren, carefully lift him and carry him away. The space empties quickly, leaving only a few stragglers.

The council member remains still and composed as she turns back to Essence, stepping closer. Her eyes study Essence intently, a mix of curiosity and certainty in her gaze. As she approaches, Sable's expression softens, her once unwavering face turning into a kind smile.

SABLE  
(softly)  
We've been looking for you, dear.

Essence is taken aback.

NIX  
(clearing throat)  
Council member Sable, if I may...I  
think some rest would be essential to  
end this exciting night.

Sable looks momentarily surprised by Nix's suggestion but quickly nods in agreement, her expression softening as she glances at her watch.

SABLE  
My apologies, it is rather late. The  
council will meet with you after, and  
we will have Phoenix here take you to  
your resting quarters.

Essence lets out a quiet sigh of relief, giving a small nod.

Before departing, Sable gives Nix a satisfied nod.

INT. HAVEN HALLWAY - NIGHT

Nix leads Essence down the quiet, winding corridors of the Haven, the soft glow of lanterns casting long shadows. As they walk, Essence's eyes wander over the old tapestries lining the walls, depicting moments from the history of The Collective. One particular tapestry catches her attention—a woven image of the Iseda lineage.

Her breath hitches as she sees it—her family name, stitched into the intricate design, with the faces of ancestors staring back at her. She halts at one particular figure, goosebumps covering her arms and she hears the voice again. She stares, entranced.

VOICE (V.O.)  
Essence...

ESSENCE  
...Who's this?

Nix looks back, their pace slowing as they follow her gaze.

NIX  
(softly)  
That's your grandmother. She, uh...  
passed about six months ago.

Essence's face falls, the awe in her eyes shifting to deep sadness. Her hands brush against the edges of the tapestry, lingering there for a moment longer as the weight of Nix's words settles.

NIX

She was important to The Collective.  
Just like you.

Essence pulls her hand away, takes a deep breath, and steps away. The quiet of the hallway stretches out ahead of them, and Nix remains close, leading the way.

Nix stops in front of a wooden door, pushing it open to reveal a modest room.

INT. HAVEN DWELLING - NIGHT

Essence steps inside, her eyes immediately drawn to the small personal touches—a desk scattered with old papers, floating shelves lined with books, dried bundles of flowers garnishing the walls, and crystals resting upon the base of windows, soaking up the moonlight.

NIX

(softly)

This was your mother's room.

Essence stands by the bed, absorbing the weight of those words as she ponders, glancing around. She caresses the fabric on the bed.

ESSENCE

My mother...

Nix remains near the doorway, giving her space while staying present, watching her quietly.

NIX

I'll let you get some rest.

Essence hesitations, looking up at Nix, a flicker of vulnerability in her eyes.

ESSENCE

Wait, will you...stay? Just until I  
fall asleep.

Nix raises an eyebrow, surprised for a moment, but then nods, giving a reassuring smile.

NIX

Of course.

Nix steps into the room, closing the door behind them with a click as Essence pulls the covers back and climbs into bed. She pats the space beside her, and Nix moves to sit on the edge.

ESSENCE

Thank you.

NIX

I'll stay as long as you need.

For a moment, the room falls into comfortable silence. Nix reaches for the lamp on the nightstand, twisting it off, casting the room into darkness. Before Nix can fully take their hand back, Essence gently grabs onto it, entwining her fingers with theirs.

ESSENCE

(barely audible)

She never told me...my mother...

With that, Essence rolls over, her grip on Nix's hand firm but gentle. She closes her eyes, her breathing softening as sleep begins to take over. Nix stays still, letting her hold on.

EXT. IN-BETWEEN - DUSK - DREAM SEQUENCE

Essence stands in a vast, open field. Children run around in bursts of giggles, their forms blending into welts of color. Everything around her feels slow and blurred, her body heavy, her feet planted in place. She notices a familiar figure standing apart from the children, their back turned—her grandmother, **LULA MAE ISEDA** (80s), also known as **GRANDMA LULU** stands tall.

INT. HAVEN DWELLING - NIGHT

Essence shifts slightly in her sleep, her hand twitching as though reaching for something. Her head moves to the side, her breathing growing heavier as she rests alone in the room.

EXT. IN-BETWEEN - DUSK - DREAM SEQUENCE

Essence tries to move forward, but her legs feel heavy, weighed down by the ground beneath her. She reaches her hand before her, struggling to close the gap. The figure turns slowly, a soft smile spreading across her grandmother's lips.

GRANDMA LULU  
(ghostly)  
Essence...there you are, dear...

INT. HAVEN DWELLING - NIGHT

Essence's fingers stretch out from the side of the bed, curling slightly, grasping at nothing. A bead of sweat trickles down her temple, her face tightening in distress as she stirs in her sleep.

EXT. IN-BETWEEN - DUSK - DREAM SEQUENCE

The children's laughter fades into muffled echoes. Two young girls play tag around the hem of her Grandma Lulu's skirt as she moves toward Essence, closing the space between them.

With each step, the sky darkens, swirling as though everything is shifting around them. Essence pushes harder, her movements feel sluggish, like moving through water.

ESSENCE  
(grunting)  
Almost...there...

INT. HAVEN DWELLING - MORNING

Essence's eyes flutter open, her body tense and drenched in sweat. Her breath comes in shallow gasps as she blinks against the soft morning light. For a moment, she lies still, staring up at the ceiling. With a shaky exhale, Essence wipes the sweat from her forehead, her hands trembling slightly as her curls cling to her head.

She swings her feet over the bed, pushing herself up. Her fingers graze over her mother's belongings, carefully tracing the outline of a crystal before pulling a book from the shelf. Her eyes then settle upon the cluttered desk.

Moving toward it, she shifts through the loose pages scattered on top before opening one of the drawers, rummaging through the trinkets inside. At the bottom, hidden toward the back, her hand brushes against something smooth—a worn, leather-bound journal.

Essence's breath catches as she pulls the journal free, the worn leather soft beneath her fingertips. She turns it over in her hands, the edges frayed, as though it had been used and held countless times before. With a deep breath, she carefully opens the cover.

The pages inside are filled with her mother's neat handwriting, notes and entries scribbled across the paper. Some passages are clear, while others are faded. Essence's eyes skim the first few pages before sitting at the desk. She continues flipping through the journal slowly, each turned page rustling against her fingers.

ESSENCE

Why didn't she tell me any of this...

Her fingers trace the ink, the words and drawings of sigils, spells, and personal thoughts bleed into the margins, between notes, warnings, and frustrated scratches.

The sound of faint voices pulls her attention from the journal, her focus drawn to the soft murmurs coming from beyond the door. She listens intently.

INT. HAVEN HALLWAY - OUTSIDE THE DOOR - DAY

Luce and Zuri stand in the hall, their voices hushed but tense. Luce presses her ear against the wooden door, listening for any sounds of movement inside.

LUCE

Do you think she's still sleeping?

Zuri stands back, arms crossed, an impatient look on her face.

ZURI

If she is, we've got a real Sleeping Beauty on our hands.

Luce glances at Zuri, frowning at the remark.

LUCE

She's been through a lot. Healing someone like that, infected with wraithroot—it's never been done.

Zuri's frustration simmers, her arms dropping as she lets out a sharp breath.

ZURI

(gritting her teeth)

And that's the problem, Luce. It's never been done. I've never been able to heal it—I can only put someone in a state of comatose, buy them time. And she waltzes in, almost heals Soren completely, without even knowing what she's doing?

Luce's gaze softens, seeing the pain in Zuri's words. She sighs.

LUCE

(gentle but firm)

That doesn't mean she had it easy. You saw her. She was completely drained afterward.

ZURI

Drained or not, she did it. And I can't. What does that say about me?

LUCE

You know it's not a competition, Zuri. We're all trying to save him, and everyone else in the Collective who's infected. What matters is that he's alive...because of her.

Zuri sighs heavily.

ZURI

Yeah, well the Council won't wait forever.

The hallway falls silent again, and just as Zuri opens her mouth to say something more, the door creaks open behind them. Both she and Luce turn toward the sound.

Essence stands in the doorway, her expression steady but tired. Her hair is pulled back into a high messy bun, with a few stray curls shaping her face. She's wearing old clothes from her mother's closet, the fabric worn.

ESSENCE

They don't need to wait any longer, I'm ready.

She gives a small, reassuring smile, meeting both Luce's soft expression and Zuri's more guarded, contented look.

LUCE

Are you sure you're ready?

ZURI

Good to hear.

Zuri, still leaning against the wall, raises an eyebrow, her arms crossed. She gives Essence a quick glance over, reserved. Luce's elbow digs into her side, giving her a disappointed look.

ESSENCE

It's now or never, right?

There's a moment of silence before Zuri straightens up. She peels off of the wall with ease.

ZURI

Alright then, let's get this over with.

Luce looks at Essence with heavy eyes, apologizing silently.

ESSENCE

(to Luce, with a smile)

I'm glad you made it back.

Luce squeezes Essence's hand before they both follow behind Zuri's stride. As they walk, Essence looks between the corridors, searching for a familiar face.

INT. THE UNDERGROVE - DAY

Zuri and Luce turn a corner, leading Essence down a long, sloping corridor. As they walk, the stone floor beneath their feet changes subtly, cracks appearing where the roots of ancient

trees have broken through. The light from the rest of the Haven fades, replaced by the soft glow of bioluminescent moss clinging to the walls, casting an eerie light.

Essence's phone vibrates in her pocket. She glances down, seeing her mother's name flash on the screen. Her steps falter briefly as she considers answering, her thumb hovering over the screen before she hesitates, pocketing the phone without answering.

They continue forward until the corridor opens into a vast underground chamber. The ceiling is high and twisted with thick, gnarled roots that spiral down from above, some stretching across the walls like veins.

At the center of the chamber, a stone platform rises from the ground, surrounded by low, smooth rocks that serve as seats. The platform is etched with intricate runes, and at its heart, a small, shallow pool reflects the soft glow of the moss, rippling gently as if disturbed by unseen forces.

Essence's eyes wander, taking in the magnitude of the space. The soft chatter of Sable and **SELENE SOLA** vibrates against the darkened walls, a quiet hum that contrasts with the stillness of the room. As soon as they spot Essence, Selene's face lights up.

SELENE SOLA

Goodness, gracious. You're the spitting image of your mother.

Selene rises gracefully, standing tall and poised, her presence exuding confidence and creativity. Her long auburn hair cascades over her shoulders in soft waves, contrasting with the warmth of her deep brown skin. Her sharp, curious eyes—framed by delicate glasses—seem to sparkle with the recognition as she takes in Essence's appearance.

She closes the gap between them, her hand raising in awe as if to inspect Essence's features more closely. Her fingers hover near Essence's face, her eyes tracing familiar lines, the memory of someone else flashing behind them.

ESSENCE

You knew my mother?

Selene's expression shifts, softening with nostalgia. Her lips curve into a bittersweet smile as she speaks, her voice dropping to something more personal.

SELENE SOLA  
(giggling)  
Knew her? She was the only woman I ever  
loved, pre-transition anyway.

Essence looks wide-eyed.

SELENE SOLA  
(urgently)  
How is she? Is she here?

Sable clears her throat, her voice cutting through the sudden intensity of the moment as Essence gently shakes her head.

SABLE  
Selene, give the girl some space, would  
you?

SELENE SOLA  
(stepping back)  
Yes, yes, I suppose you are right.

Before the tension can linger, the room shifts. The air seems to grow heavier, and all eyes turn toward the entrance as **ADELINA** makes her way in.

Adelina, the eldest of the council, moves with the quiet grace of someone who has long outlived the world's noise. Her skin is dark and weathered, etched with deep lines of wisdom, each wrinkle telling a story of its own. Her silver locs are long and pulled back into a series of intricate braids. Though her frame is slight, her presence fills the room, commanding respect without needing to speak.

Her eyes, a deep, piercing gray, sweep across the chamber, taking in the gathered council and settling on Essence with a look of quiet, profound understanding. The weight of Adelina's gaze makes Essence's breath catch, but she holds it, seeing the depth of wisdom in the woman's eyes/

Suddenly, Nix appears behind Essence, so silently she jumps.

NIX  
(whispering)  
That is Elder Adelina. Don't let her  
fool you. She is hundreds of years old.

Essence, still feeling tension in her body, glances back at Nix from the corner of her eye. She smiles, and her shoulders relax slightly, the weight of the moment eased by their presence.

Zuri, standing a few feet away, watches quietly from behind, her expression unreadable.

ADELINA

We have waited long enough. Zuri, Luce,  
please tend to our ill, and keep a  
close eye on Soren.

Zuri nods curtly, her face remaining unreadable as she steps back toward the door. Luce, however, lingers for a moment, giving Essence a soft, reassuring glance before following Zuri out of the room.

The sound of their footsteps fades into the distance, leaving the council members, Essence, and Nix.

As Adelina opens her mouth to speak, **TALA**, slips in, her movement fluid and unnoticed, taking her seat by Sable. Essence locks eyes with the whites of her eyes. Tala smiles as soon as their eyes meet.

**TALA's**, who smiles as soon as their eyes meet. Her eyes are entirely clouded over, the milky white of her blindness moving like orbs, remaining sharp and focused. She is tall and lean, with warm, bronze skin and long dark hair adorned with small beads and feathers woven into delicate braids. An intricate tattoo wraps around her wrist, becoming lost within the draped fabric that consumes her.

SABLE

(to Tala)

It's nice of you to join us.

TALA

(playful)

I wouldn't miss it for the world.

Adelina clears her throat, and the playful tone fades as the room's attention shifts back to Essence. Adelina extends her hand, gesturing to the smooth stone platform at the center of the chamber.

ADELINA

Please, sit, Essence.

Essence hesitates, glancing at Nix for reassurance. Nix gives her a small, encouraging nod, and Essence moves toward the center of the room. She lowers herself onto the platform, her fingers brushing against the cool stone.

SELENE SOLA  
(whispering with glee)  
That used to be your Grandmother's  
seat. Quite fitting, isn't it?

Essence looks down at her seat, her fingers tracing the stone.

ADELINA  
Before we can proceed with what lies  
ahead, there's a matter we need to  
discuss—wraithroot.

SELENE SOLA  
(leaning in, voice steady)  
Wraithroot is a parasitic affliction—

SABLE  
(interrupting, grave)  
It's ancient, almost prehistoric. We  
are surprised it has survived this  
long.

ADELINA  
You see, the state of our planet—in  
both this realm and the other—has  
deteriorated. The melting icecaps, and  
the unnatural warming of the Earth,  
have weakened the barriers between  
realms. This environmental shift has  
awakened things long buried. Wraithroot  
being one of them.

SELENE SOLA  
If there was a cure, it was not passed  
on by any of our people.

ADELINA  
Yes. Unfortunately, the art of  
countering wraithroot has been  
forgotten. But now it's spreading, and  
its reemergence is worse than we  
feared.

SABLE

It spreads through the body like wildfire. It starts by attacking the immune system, leaving the host vulnerable and weak. The black veins you saw on Soren—that's just the surface. Beneath, it's suffocating his organs, rotting him from the inside out as it consumes his essence. Once it reaches the heart...it goes for the soul...

SELENE SOLA

(grimly)

Then, it's over.

ADELINA

Wraithroot also disrupts the mind—fever, confusion, hallucinations. And for those with magical bloodlines, it can drain their power entirely, rendering them defenseless until death.

SABLE

Soren was on the brink of death dear, but you—you-nearly healed him completely. That's...unheard of.

SELENE SOLA

Not to mention, healers...well, are incredibly rare. The Iseda lineage is one of the eldest, and before your grandmother passed, there were four—your grandmother, Lula Mae, Evelyn, your mother, you...and Zuri, from the Njoku line.

ADELINA

That's no small feat, Essence. We need to know *how* you managed to stop the parasite from reaching his heart.

Essence clears her throat, her fingers nervously fidgeting with the fabric of her clothing. She inhales deeply, her gaze flicking across the room as all eyes focus on her.

ESSENCE

I wish I could explain exactly what happened. But the truth is...I don't know. I felt this...energy overcome me. Like I was being guided.

TALA

(learning forward)

Guided...but untrained...

Tala glances at her fellow council members, exchanging a silent look that holds the weight of their shared understanding. Adelina picks up on the unspoken message and speaks up.

ADELINA

Phoenix, your palm.

Nix steps forward without hesitation, offering their hand. Adelina draws a small, gleaming blade from the folds of her robe and makes a clean, swift cut across Nix's palm. Blood pools quickly, and Essence gasps, staring at Adelina in shock.

ESSENCE

(alarmed)

Wait—what are you doing?

ADELINA

We need to see if you can control your power. This is no longer about instinct, Essence—the stakes are too high.

NIX

Essence, it's okay. It's not life-threatening. I trust you.

Essence looks between Nix's bleeding hand and the council. The sound of her heartbeat pulses in her ears as all eyes are on her. She exhales shakily, her wavering hands raising above Nix's exposed palm. She looks down, staring solely at the gash.

TALA

(quiet, observant)

Your hesitation is clouding your gifts, Essence. Breathe...focus.

Essence takes another deep breath, placing her hand directly over Nix's cut. As she wills the magic to come through, her

temples pulse. Slowly, a soft glow forms beneath her palms—a pale lilac light—but it flickers unevenly, weaker than before.

The council watches in silence, their expressions unreadable. Essence bites her lip, concentrating harder. The flow intensifies briefly, but instead of healing the wound, Nix winces in pain. Essence pulls her hand back in alarm.

NIX

(gritting teeth, softly)

It's alright, Essence. Just...keep trying...believe in the magic.

Nix smiles sheepishly through the pain. Essence's breath becomes shallow, the lilac glow fading completely, leaving the wound on Nix's palm exposed and bleeding. Her eyes dart around the room, avoiding the disappointed looks.

ESSENCE

I...I don't know why it's not working.

The council members exchange uneasy glances, their murmurs starting to grow louder.

SABLE

What exactly happened last night, Phoenix?

The room quiets as all eyes shift to Nix.

NIX

It was at the diner. Soren was getting worse—convulsions, fever, black veins spreading fast. It looked like... well, we thought we were going to lose him.

SELENE SOLA

And then what? What did Essence do?

NIX

She—she didn't know at first. None of us did. But when she touched him... something happened. There was this light, this... lilac glow. She started healing him—like, really healing him. The veins started to retract, and his breathing stabilized. It was incredible.

Sable leans forward, her eyes narrowing in thought.

SABLE

But she didn't finish the job, did she?  
Soren is still alive, but not fully  
healed.

NIX

No, she couldn't finish. She  
was...exhausted. Completely drained.  
Her powers were waning.

TALA

(to herself)

Guided, but untrained.

The council murmurs, voices rising again, as they exchange theories, trying to make sense of the situation.

TALA

(whispering in Essence's ear)

Come with me, child. This is not  
something that can be solved in the  
heat of their bickering.

Without waiting for a response, Tala grasps Essence's wrist, leading her quietly toward the exit.

INT. CONSERVATORY - MIDDAY

Tala leads Essence into a space enclosed by a high, domed glass ceiling that lets sunlight pour in from all angles, illuminating the room in a golden haze. The back wall is cobbled stone, worn with age, and overgrown with thick vines.

Around the conservatory, large wooden tables are scattered with jars of freshly picked and dried herbs, mortar and pestles placed near open books filled with handwritten notes on herbal remedies. Bundles of plants hang from the ceiling. In the corner, glass containers hold colorful liquids of infused remedies.

Tala releases Essence's wrist and steps further into the room, her hands trailing over the bundles of dried herbs. She moves with a purpose, her steps light as though she is at home.

TALA

Nix will be just fine. I'm sure they'll find Zuri in the infirmary and then make their way over.

Essence blinks in surprise, her unspoken question answered. Tala steps closer, her movements deliberate, and the space around them seems to hum.

ESSENCE

How did you—

TALA

(smiling)

I see more than most, even with these old eyes.

Tala taps the side of her head, her milky white eyes shifting in their sockets. She moves gracefully around the room, her fingers grazing the various herbs and plants. Essence watches her, still feeling confused.

ESSENCE

Why could I do it last night, but now...it's like I'm blocked?

Tala stops at one of the tables, picking up a small bundle of lavender and twirling it between her fingers. She gestures for Essence to sit on a nearby stool. Essence complies, her gaze tracking Tala's every move.

TALA

Healing is not just a gift, Essence. It's a connection—a bridge between you, the world, and your own spirit. Last night, you acted on instinct. There were factors at play—your birthday, the full moon—all amplifying your power. You were guided by raw emotion, pure and uncontrolled. But today...there are expectations, pressures. And that makes it harder to reach. Magic responds to our deepest selves, and right now, something inside you is holding that back.

ESSENCE

But how do I fix it? If the council's right and I am one of the last healers...if it's true...I don't have time to figure this out.

Tala sets the lavender down and takes a deep breath, closing the distance between them. She kneels down, her milky eyes staring past Essence.

TALA

You've been blocked for a long time. Bound, actually—by something deep within you, buried so far beneath the surface that you can't reach it alone. Your power sits dormant, tangled behind pain you've yet to confront.

Essence's brows furrow, confusion settling more.

ESSENCE

(whispers)

I'm afraid I don't know what you are referring to.

TALA

Lula Mae. Your grandmother...she did what she thought was best. She bound your gifts when you were very young at the behest of your mother. But it's more than just her binding. There's something else. Something deeper, within you.

Essence pulls back slightly, her heart racing as she processes this.

ESSENCE

Then, what is it? What's blocking me?

Tala's eyes narrow, focusing intently on the energy around Essence, but even she hesitates.

TALA

There is trauma...a wound... but I can't see it fully. It's as though your spirit is split, fragmented—

disconnected. Your spirit is...  
incongruous.

Essence feels a knot tighten in her chest at the word, like something raw and unresolved.

ESSENCE  
(shaking her head)  
Incongruous?

TALA  
Yes. Two parts of you are at war—one trying to protect the other. And until they are reconciled, you'll remain...incomplete.

ESSENCE  
How do I fix something I don't even understand?

Tala moves closer to the shelves behind her, her fingers grazing over a collection of jars filled with dried herbs. She selects a few, carefully setting them aside—lavender, chamomile, mugwort, valerian root, and yarrow. She handles each herb with care as if reacquainting herself with old friends.

TALA  
There's nothing quite like tea to ease the mind. Your grandmother often did this...and your mother too. Tea has always been more than just a drink for our people. It's a way to connect—to nature, to our spirits, to our ancestors. And sometimes, with the right ingredients, it helps us see what we've been hiding from ourselves.

Tala flicks her wrist, igniting a flame beneath the kettle with a subtle spell. The flame catches quickly, and the kettle begins to heat.

ESSENCE  
Like...a potion?

Essence watches Tala in awe.

TALA  
 (laughing)  
 Ha, yes, something like that. We'll  
 start with the herbs.

Essence moves to Tala's side, her eyes scanning the unlabeled jars, uncertain. Tala's hands move effortlessly as she picks up a jar and opens it, bringing it close to her nose.

ESSENCE  
 How do you know what they are?

Tala pauses, then holds the jar under Essence's nose.

TALA  
 How do I know? The same way you will,  
 in time. It's in the scent, the  
 texture...and the energy they carry.

Essence inhales the subtle floral notes, nodding softly. She accepts the herbs Tala hands her and gently crushes them in the mortar, her motions slow and deliberate.

Tala watches with an almost imperceptible smile, her blind eyes seeming to follow Essence's every movement with uncanny precision. As they work together, Tala's voice fills the space, steady and calm.

ESSENCE  
 What purpose does each herb offer?

TALA  
 (teasingly)  
 I'm glad you asked, young scholar.  
 Lavender induces tranquility and vivid  
 dreaming. It calms the mind so that the  
 spirit, in this case, can wander  
 freely.

Tala hands Essence a few dried chamomile flowers.

TALA  
 Chamomile induces deep, restful  
 slumber—along with lucid dreaming, so  
 you can have control over what you see.

Essence adds the chamomile, listening intently as Tala picks up a bundle of mugwort.

TALA

Mugwort carries similar properties. It sharpens clarity and brings forth profound dreams—ones that will guide you to remembrance.

Tala pauses a moment, her blind eyes seemingly tracing Essence's features.

TALA

Valerian root, for stillness. To quiet the parts of you that are afraid, and to ease your heart...while also aiding in dream-making.

Essence grinds the herbs together as Tala takes the last dried herb, holding it delicately between her fingers.

TALA

And lastly, yarrow...to fortify and anchor the spirit as it journeys through the dreamscapes.

As Essence finishes crushing the herbs, the kettle lets out a sharp, high-pitched whistle, signaling the water's readiness. Tala moves swiftly, extinguishing the flame with a small wave of her hand, the whistle fading into the background.

Tala sets the kettle on a tray, its copper sides gleaming in the soft light, placing it beside the mortar and a ceramic cup.

TALA

Are you ready for some answers?

Essence sets the flower down, staring at the dried mixture, feeling the warmth of the steam brush on her face. She hesitates for only a moment before nodding, her eyes resolute.

ESSENCE

I've never been more ready to make sense of things.

Tala gestures toward an open space near the center of the conservatory, where the sunlight filters through the dome, casting a golden light over their heads. Essence follows her,

weaving through patches of rosemary and lavender that line the floor.

Tala lowers herself to the ground with ease, crossing her legs beneath her, her movements fluid and calm. Essence mirrors her movements, settling down in the warm glow. The tray rests between them, steam curling upward in soft tendrils.

TALA

Essence, this is no ordinary tea. The components, the intention, will guide you inward, to where your spirit resides—mangled and unresolved. It will show you what you've buried, only if you are willing to listen.

Tala sprinkles the dried herbs into the cup, her movements are measured and deliberate. Carefully, she pours the hot water over them. The tea begins to steep, the colors deepening, swirling together.

Tala hands Essence the cup, their fingers briefly touching. Essence looks up, her breath shallow. Her hands cradle the cup, and for a moment she pauses.

ESSENCE

Will you be here when I wake up?

TALA

(reassuringly)

I'll be near.

A tender sigh escapes her as she lifts the cup to her lips, blowing on the brim. She takes a cautious sip, a gentle moan leaving her lips, her eyes closing. A faint ringing begins in her right ear—so subtle, it barely registers.

Essence shudders as a deep yawn cascades through her body. She opens her eyes, peering into the ripples of the tea, pressing her finger against her ear as if trying to stifle the growing hum.

TALA

Remember, don't resist it. Fear is simply the truth we hide from ourselves. Surrender to the truth.

Essence takes another sip, her breathing slowing. The conservatory around her starts to fade, the golden light blurring as the gentle hum morphs into a steady, melodic ringing, pulling her deeper into a trance.

EXT. IN-BETWEEN - TWILIGHT

Essence opens her eyes to find herself in a place neither here, nor there, the sky above an endless gradient of deepening twilight. The air hums with a strange, low vibration.

Essence steps forward, her feet sinking slightly into the ground, a mix of soft earth. Wisps of shadow and light float around her, forming fleeting images and voices, like the northern lights.

A rhythmic, distant creaking echoes, unsettling yet magnetic, drawing her forward.

INT. KITCHEN - EVENING (MEMORY)

With a blink, she's suddenly standing in an unfamiliar and cluttered kitchen, the light whistle of a kettle sounding. Her eyes turn, falling on her mother, Evelyn, standing at the stove. As she turns, one hand carries the simmering kettle and her other hand rests on a rounded belly.

Evelyn pours the contents of the kettle into a mug, her movements methodical, while her gaze is distant, almost wary. She glances toward the doorway, where **Leo**, Essence's father, leans, a warm but tired smile on his face as he watches Evelyn, who looks right past Essence.

EVELYN

I just...can't shake the feeling that  
the cycle will repeat itself, one way  
or another.

Leo walks in, arms raised to embrace Evelyn. He kisses her forehead.

LEO

Mi amor, you can't think that way.

Essence reaches for her, but as her hand extends, the soft, rhythmic tap of Evelyn's fingers on the mug fills the room. Her

grip tightens around the cup, her gaze distant. Then—the room flickers, twisting and stretching.

EXT. IN-BETWEEN - TWILIGHT

Essence stumbles back into the twilight, her heart racing. She takes a few shaky breaths, feeling the sting of abandonment. She turns, and there, ahead of her, stands an ancient wardrobe, slightly ajar, the source of the creaking.

Fear coils in her stomach, wearing on her face, but she's drawn forward, compelled to the hollow creak.

As she reaches for the wardrobe,

EXT. 6TH GRADE FIELD - DAY (MEMORY)

The scenery shifts once more, and suddenly she's standing in an open field, bright and loud with the sounds of children playing. She sees herself as a child, sitting alone, watching the other kids play, and then—a young Mai. Young Essence stands, watching, nerves consuming her.

Her young voice echoes, barely audible, trembling.

YOUNG ESSENCE

Can I...can I sit here?

Mai glances up, a hint of surprise on her face, before nodding.

The sound of the children fades, and shadows crawl across the field. Her childhood self and Mai begin to disappear, leaving Essence alone.

EXT. IN-BETWEEN - DUSK

The warm memory disintegrates, replaced by the dense, darkening air of the In-Between. The shadows grow deeper, and now a faint shimmer of red lingers on the horizon, almost like firelight. Essence looks up to see her own reflection flickering across the sky, her face shifting between ages, her expressions haunted.

A voice calls, faint yet clear.

YOUNG ESSENCE

Would you like to play with us?

She turns, her breath catching as she sees three young girls standing by the wardrobe.

Their figure is bathed in shadow and for a moment their images glitch, revealing two of the girls maturing into her mother, Evelyn, and her Grandma Lulu.

In the youngest girl's hands, she holds a mirror, its surface cracked and gleaming, reflecting glimpses of Essence's memories.

Essence takes a step forward, but their faces fade into the darkness, leaving only the wardrobe behind, its door wide open now. The creaking grows louder, the sound now unmistakably like a heartbeat.

INT. WARDROBE - NIGHT (MEMORY)

Essence steps through the door and finds herself in a narrow, enclosed space. It's suffocatingly dark, shadows closing in on her, pressing against her skin. She tries to move, but it's as if the walls themselves are holding her back. She pushes through, her hands brushing against strange objects—a broken comb, an old photo crumbling at the edges, a small child's shoe—each item sparking a memory, a fragment of pain.

She reaches out, and her hand meets the cold surface of a mirror inside the wardrobe. Her adolescent reflection stares back, eyes wide with fear, her face pale.

BOY (O.S.)

Ready or not—

Young Essence shuts her eyes tight, her small hands clamping over her ears as her head shakes from side to side. In the mirror, Essence mimics her younger self's every move. As she opens her eyes, the reflection shifts, morphing into a new mirage.

Her grandmother, Lula Mae, appears in the reflection now, her face etched with a quiet sadness, as though she's debating something heavy. Lula Mae's hand hovers over a weathered leather-bound book that lies open on the counter beside her.

INT. GRANDMOTHER'S KITCHEN - NIGHT (MEMORY)

Lula Mae stares out the window, into the night, her fingers grazing the edges of a page titled *Iranti Olvidada*. Her hand

trembles, the weight of her decision visible in the lines on her face. She gazes into the window, her eyes fixed as if looking at Essence.

LULA MAE

It's just one incantation...for the  
better of the Collective...

Her hand hovers, poised to close the book, but she hesitates, her fingers trembling over the ancient pages. Essence reaches forward instinctively, as if to stop her, but pauses, her breath hitching as she catches the sorrow in her grandmother's gaze.

Then, with a deep, shuddering breath, Lula Mae lifts her hand to the candle beside her. She blows it out, extinguishing the light and plunging the small kitchen—and Essence—into darkness. Essence is left alone in the shadows, the weight of the memory pressing down on her.

INT. COLLECTIVE BEDROOM - AFTERNOON (MEMORY)

Essence stumbles out of the wardrobe, gasping, her hands trembling as she tries to steady herself. She finds herself in a dim, familiar room—the room her mother once occupied within the Collective.

At the closet, a teen Evelyn yanks clothes from hangers, stuffing them hastily into a worn backpack. Her movements are frantic, barely contained, as though each item she grabs brings her closer to escape. Her breaths come shallow and quick, and she keeps throwing anxious glances toward the closed door, expecting it to swing open at any moment.

Behind her, a pre-transitioned Selene Sola stands in the doorway, their expression stricken, torn between frustration and concern.

SELENE SOLA

Where are you even going to go?

Evelyn freezes, clutching a handful of clothes. She stares at the fabric in her hands before she straightens, her face setting with determination.

EVELYN

I-I don't know. To stay with Leo, he's  
getting an apartment in town. I just, I

can't be here. Magic isn't the answer.  
It can't save me.

SELENE SOLA

You have to give it time, Evelyn.  
Healing isn't instant.

EVELYN

That's the thing, I have given it time,  
Silas. And nothing is working. I can't  
keep grasping at these rituals, these  
incantations. And all my mother wants  
to do...is wipe my memory, like that'll  
erase everything that's happened.

Selene/Silas' expression softens, but they say nothing as Evelyn  
slings the bag over her shoulder, giving the room one last,  
aching look over before she heads for the door, pausing only to  
glance back at her friend.

With a determined breath, Evelyn steps forward, and—

MATCH CUT TO:

INT. FAMILY HOME - FRONT DOOR - DAY (MEMORY)

—Evelyn's feet hit the floor, sunlight streaming over her as she  
steps onto the front porch, holding six-year-old Essence by the  
hand. She kneels down, the worn bag slipping from Evelyn's  
shoulder, landing beside them, forgotten.

Evelyn investigates Essence's wide, innocent eyes, and her own  
fill with a mixture of remorse and fierce love.

EVELYN

(voice breaking)

I promised I wouldn't let anything ever  
happen to you...and I am so, so, so  
deeply sorry, my love.

Young Essence wraps her tiny arms around her mother.

YOUNG ESSENCE

Mommy, don't cry.

Evelyn pulls her close, standing as Leo steps out the door with  
a few last belongings, picking up the fallen bag and closing the  
door behind him.

As they walk toward the curb, piled household furniture awaits on the street, the wardrobe standing among them.

A gust of wind rustles, sweeping over the wardrobe in particular, the familiar ghostly creak returning as Essence's hair tousles over her eyes.

EXT. IN-BETWEEN - TWILIGHT

Essence moves her hair from her eyes, and she stares at the wardrobe now before her, no longer abandoned on the curb but standing in the surreal twilight of the In-Between. She breathes in, the distant hum of the place consuming her.

Suddenly, a small figure darts out from behind the wardrobe—her younger self, wide-eyed and terrified, breathless.

YOUNG ESSENCE  
 (urgent whispering)  
 He's coming, he's coming, we have to  
 hide!

Her younger self beckons her closer, crouching behind the wardrobe, its door slightly ajar. Essence obliges, crouching beside her as they both peek over its edge. The shadows around them seem to stretch and ripple, merging with the thickening twilight.

YOUNG ESSENCE  
 Do you see him?

ESSENCE  
 Who?

Before Young Essence can respond, the air shifts—a faint, chilling echo of whispers floats through the In-Between, and the words almost seem to come from nowhere and everywhere.

DISJOINTED VOICES  
 (faint whispers)  
 You must be new. What's your name?  
 Okay, but what are you? You're not  
 Black, Black. Hold still...picture-  
 perfect.

FLASH—A fleeting image of her mother, a straightener in hand, smoothing Essence' curls, her grip firm.

Essence presses herself closer to the wardrobe, the whispers creeping up her spine. Her younger self glances up at her, hearing them too.

DISJOINTED VOICES

(harsher, above a whisper)

You're pretty for a Black girl...so exotic.

FLASH-A boy's smirk from across a school hallway, his gaze lingering on her with a look she can't quite place. Essence blinks, and the image vanishes.

The wardrobe creaks open slightly, and the sound jolts them. She glances back at it, feeling drawn to the darkness within.

DISJOINTED VOICES

But, where do your parents come from?  
You don't even speak Mexican. Is your hair even real?

Essence presses her back against the wardrobe, looking up at the sky.

ESSENCE

Why are you doing this? What are you trying to tell me?

DISJOINTED VOICES

You're such a tease.

FLASH-Essence pressed up against a wall, a boy's hand brushing her cheek as he says, "*I've never kissed a girl like you before.*" Her eyes dart around, searching for an escape.

A deep, hollow silence fills the air, then—

DISJOINTED VOICES

(sharper, taunting)

Here I come...

Her younger self grabs her arm tightly, pulling her toward the wardrobe, her voice trembling with desperation.

YOUNG ESSENCE

We have to hide.

Essence stares at the wardrobe's dark, open mouth, the inside a swirling void of shadows and memories. She glances down at her

younger self, her fear mirrored in the child's eyes, but this time, she nods.

They step forward together, entering the wardrobe, the door creaking closed behind them, the darkness swallowing them.

EXT. IN-BETWEEN - LAKE

Essence finds herself standing at the edge of a vast, still lake. The water's surface is dark, mirroring the endless twilight sky above, stars scattered like fragments of memory. She looks around, scanning for her younger self, but sees only her own reflection staring back from the water's surface.

ESSENCE

(barely a whisper)

I-I don't understand...

The water shifts, her reflection wavering until her mother's face appears beneath her own. Their eyes, layered together, share the same flicker of doubt. Essence's breath catches, and she steps back, but the face shifts again, aging into her grandmother, Lula Mae—eyes burdened, filled with a wisdom tinged by sorrow.

Essence's heart pounds. She looks down at the lake, feeling an unsettling pull as if the water itself is calling her.

DISJOINTED VOICES

(distant & soft)

...Ready or not...

Essence clenches her fists, her reflection distorting, fading, then sharpening into her younger self's frightened expression. Her younger self's eyes are wide, mirroring the same childhood fear Essence thought she'd left behind. The water ripples again, shadows spreading like ink across its surface.

GRANDMA LULU (V.O.)

(whisper)

...the hardest memories are the ones we carry alone...

Essence's eyes begin to fill with tears, the reflections shifting and multiplying—her mother, her grandmother, and finally herself, all faces flickering between expressions of

fear, longing, and the weight of unspoken pain. She crouches by the lake, reaching her hand toward the water's surface.

ESSENCE

(voice breaking)

How...how do I remember something long forgotten?

Her reflection trembles, the layers of her family's faces becoming indistinct, fading into darkness. She draws her hand back, but the words echo softly once more.

DISJOINTED VOICES

(whispering, insistent)

...Here I come...

The lake's surface goes still, her face alone now, staring back up at her with an expression of fear she recognizes all too well. She closes her eyes, squeezing them shut against the mounting memories, but the weight of what she's uncovering presses against her, cold and undeniable.

INT. CONSERVATORY - DAWN

The first light of dawn slips through the glass ceiling, casting warm hues across the room. Essence stirs, her body curled on the ground with a cushion under her head. For a moment, she's alone, the quiet stretching around her. She winces, feeling the stiffness in her body as she massages the back of her neck.

TALA

Welcome back.

Essence blinks, turning her head to the sound of Tala's voice. Tala is across the room, tending to a sprawling collection of plants in ceramic pots, misting each leaf with gentle care.

ESSENCE

(hoarse)

What...how long was I-

TALA

It's a new dawn, child.

Essence sits up, her gaze following Tala's slow, rhythmic movements as she waters each plant with practiced hands. Nearby, she notices Nix, slumped on a wooden chair and fast asleep,

their head tilted back in a posture of vigilance turned to exhaustion.

TALA

The In-Between is a place of many paths. Sometimes, we return with more questions than answers.

Essence takes a moment to absorb Tala's words, her eyes tracing the delicate vines twisting up the conservatory walls. She's about to respond when Nix stirs from their sleep, roused by the gentle tones of their voices. As they shift, Essence's gaze falls on a dark, fraying cloth around Nix's hand, slightly discolored from dried blood.

ESSENCE

(concerned)

Nix, Zuri didn't heal you?

Nix sits up straighter, rubbing their eye, but their expression softens when they notice Essence's concern. They flex their injured hand slightly, wincing, a casual shrug following.

NIX

Zuri has other people to focus on.

Essence rises, moving closer, her eyes narrowing as she examines the cloth wrapped around their hand, before pulling it back. Underneath, a lengthy jagged wound appears with a discolored hue.

ESSENCE

(clearing her throat)

If you'll let me, I'd like to try again.

Nix glances down at their hand, hesitating, their eyes wandering over to Tala before giving a small nod. Essence takes a steadying breath, positioning her palms just above the wound, her fingers trembling ever so slightly.

She closes her eyes, concentrating as she did before. A faint glow begins to emanate from her palms, unsteady, flickering like a candle in the wind. For a moment, it pulses vibrantly and then dulls. The discolored skin begins to fade, knitting back together in a textured scar as Essence strains, her brows furrowed.

NIX

Well, would you look at that, good as new.

Nix flexes their hand, no longer wincing as Tala appears behind them, peering at the scar left behind.

Essence scoffs softly, shaking her head in disbelief.

ESSENCE

Now you're just lying, Nix. That scar is hideous; it shouldn't even be there.

TALA

Ah, but healing isn't about erasing, is it? Least, it shouldn't be.

Essence looks at Tala, her words settling over her, adding weight to the scar's presence. She sighs, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear.

NIX

Besides, I'll say it's a mark from the legendary Essence Iseda, herself. Makes me sound mysterious.

Essence rolls her eyes, a small smile breaking through. Before she can respond, Zuri strides in, her tone firm.

ZURI

We could use your *legendary* assistance in the infirmary to begin your training.

ESSENCE

Training?

Essence looks back at Nix, who now stands, offering an encouraging nod.

NIX

Yes, my apologies. The Council wants you to begin training, to see if learning our ways will...re-spark your talents. I was just waiting for your journey to the In-Between to end.

Essence nods slowly, brushing off her clothes as she rises.

ESSENCE

Right, makes sense.

Essence straightens her shoulders, ready to follow Zuri. But she pauses, turning to Tala, her voice soft.

ESSENCE

Tala, will I make sense of it all? The mess inside of me...I want to help the Council and everyone. Zuri shouldn't have to bear this responsibility alone.

Tala studies her, her milky eyes full of understanding.

TALA

Child, your spirit may be incongruous, but it's not always about making sense of the chaos—it's about finding your harmony within it. Only then will answers come.

Essence absorbs Tala's words, nodding, then leans in to give her a quick embrace.

ESSENCE

Thank you, for the tea and all.

INT. HAVEN'S INFIRMARY - DAY

Essence follows Zuri through a doorway, the room beyond opening to a stark and sterile infirmary. Her eyes widen as she takes in the rows of cots, some occupied by patients, their skin marred with faint, dark veins tracing up their arms and necks—evidence of the wraithroot's insidious spread.

Essence's gaze wanders to tables lined with jars, dried herbs, and tinctures, each labeled in intricate handwriting.

Zuri peels back a curtain, revealing an ashen-faced Soren, his breathing shallow. The sight makes Essence falter.

Sitting nearby, a vigilant Malik leans forward in his chair, hands clasped as he watches over his friend. He looks up as Essence and Zuri approach, his expression softening with relief.

MALIK

He's been having spells, but he's fighting it.

ZURI

We'll take it from here, Malik. Thank you for relieving Luce—she's barely left his side.

Malik hesitates, glancing back at Soren, then rises, giving Essence a brief nod.

MALIK

He'd do the same for one of us...take care of him.

ESSENCE

He's in exceptional care, I hear.

Zuri begins to adjust a poultice on Soren's arm, her hands steady and sure as Malik leaves.

ZURI

He's stabilized for now, but the wraithroot runs deep. It's entwined itself with his soul.

ESSENCE

How can you tell?

Zuri laughs briefly, not looking up from her mending.

ZURI

Wraithroot is persistent. It doesn't yield easily. Its main objective is to consume every trace of energy in the body, mind, and spirit, leaving you...

ESSENCE

Eradicated.

ZURI

Yes, exactly. As a healer, we can see the soul, think of it like an aura. It just takes some practice, some grounding.

ESSENCE

Can you show me?

Zuri looks up, studying Essence's face with a hint of approval. She finishes adjusting the poultice and gestures her forward. They stand on either side of Soren, the room quiet.

ZURI

Before anything else, clear your mind—  
you want to be fully present.

Essence inhales slowly, closing her eyes and taking a breath.

ZURI

Feel the floor beneath your feet,  
centering yourself. Let it remind you  
that you're anchored, that you're here.

Essence shifts slightly, widening her stance as she presses her weight into the ground.

ZURI

Now, with each breath, let it fill you.  
Feel it move through you, calming your  
mind and steadying your body.

Essence's shoulders relax, her breaths growing slower and more intentional.

ZURI

When your body and mind are balanced,  
your spirit can flow freely. This  
connection—yourself to the world, your  
breath to your core—that's where your  
healing should begin.

Essence's eyes flutter open.

ESSENCE

(softly)

Now what?

Zuri lets a small smile escape.

ZURI

Now, look at Soren. Open your senses,  
not just your sight. Imagine the energy  
as a light around him.

Essence focuses her gaze on Soren, breathing deeply as she attempts to follow Zuri's instructions.

ESSENCE

What am I looking for?

Essence leans in closer, her palm grasping Soren's with a gentle touch. As she makes contact, faint tendrils of shadow appear, twisting like invasive vines within a pale, faded light.

ESSENCE

Wait, I think I see it...it's corrupted, like dark vines wrapped around him.

Zuri nods, her tone grave yet calm as Essence leans in, her focus sharpening on the dark, twisting tendrils wrapping through Soren's spirit, her senses attuned to the wraithroot,

ZURI

That's wraithroot. To heal something like this—

Zuri's voice fades, her words blending into the background as Essence's focus shifts. In her peripheral vision, she catches a flicker of movement. She blinks, and at the edge of the cat stands a young boy bearing a striking resemblance to Soren, his face solemn, eyes meeting hers with a glint of recognition.

YOUNG SOREN

You're all big now.

Essence's breath catches. She stares, momentarily frozen, but the boy remains calm.

ESSENCE

(whispering)

Soren...?

She glances back at the real Soren lying still on the cot, then back to where the boy had been. The space is empty, a lingering echo of his presence hanging in the air.

Zuri, sensing her distraction, looks up.

ZURI

Essence? Are you listening?

ESSENCE

I...I thought...

Before the words come to her, a muffled sound draws their attention—a shuffling from across the room. A monitor begins to beep erratically. Suddenly, a patient in a neighboring cot convulses, their body seizing. A fellow Collective member yanks the curtain open, her voice urgent.

MEMBER 1

Zuri! Get in here, now!

Zuri shoots Essence a sharp look, her own calm breaking into swift action and without any hesitation, Essence follows. She reaches the cot first, her hands instinctively hovering over the patient as she locks her focus. A Collective member injects a clear liquid into the patient's arm, but the seizing continues.

Essence breathes in deeply through her nose, feeling the pulse of the infection between her fingers as the shadowy roots clench the patient's essence. They wrap around their arms, spreading rapidly with each spasm, turning from a dark gray to a deep black.

Essence begins to mumble the incantation from before.

ESSENCE

(repeating to self)

By the roots that bind, by the  
bloodline's grace, bring forth  
healing, through time and space.

ZURI

No, Essence, wait—! What are you  
doing?!

The familiar lilac glow begins to radiate from her palms as she tries to separate the wraithroot's dark tendrils. As she concentrates, the dark veins pulse, almost alive, reaching back toward her touch. Essence continues her incantation.

ZURI

Essence, you need to stop! Now! When  
you exert yourself, you become  
susceptible!

Zuri quickly places herself Between Essence and the convulsing patient, whose lips are turning black.

The wraithroot surges forward, lashing at Essence's energy, its invasive force pushing against her energy. Essence gasps, struggling to pull away as the infection claws at her.

ZURI  
(shouting to others)  
Get her out of here!

Essence stumbles back, dazed, as another Collective member rushes in to support her, guiding her away. Her hands shake, her soul-tinged gray from the residual energy of wraithroot. Its darkness lingers at the corners of her fingertips before fading before her eyes.

MEMBER 1  
We're losing them!

Zuri acts swiftly, kneeling beside the patient and pressing her hands over their chest, her eyes focused and determined.

ZURI  
(commanding)  
Hold them down! We're not giving up yet.

Members of the Collective secure the patient's limbs, their expressions grave. Zuri leans in, murmuring quietly in her native tongue, a faint glow pulsing beneath her hands. For a moment, the patient's breathing steadies. Then, their eyes open wide, one last gasp clenching their entire body before the light fades.

ZURI  
No...

The patient's body collapses, unmoving, as the monitor attached to them flatlines. A heavy silence falls over the room. Zuri pulls back, her face impassive, showing no outward reaction to the loss. Without a word, the members assisting begin to clear away the instruments, their movements practiced.

Essence stands frozen, her breath shallow as she stares at the still black-veined body. Zuri walks past, her gaze fixed ahead as she moves to the sink near Essence. She washes her hands, the sound of water filling the quiet then dries them in silence.

ESSENCE  
Zuri, I-I thought I had it...

Zuri's focus remains on her task, not meeting Essence's eyes as if she hadn't spoken at all. Essence hesitates, her hand half-reaching, but Zuri turns away, heading for the infirmary's exit.

ESSENCE

Zuri, I'm sorry.

Essence is left standing there, the weight of the room pressing in on her. She glances around at the other Collective members, but they avoid her gaze, intent on their duties, the silence punctuated only by the flatlines fading beep as it's finally silenced.

Her hands, still trembling slightly, feel foreign—like they no longer belong to her. She clenches them into fists, trying to steady herself.

A Collective member approaches her, their expression is sympathetic yet professional.

MEMBER 3

Ms. Iseda, we must examine you now.

The member gestures toward a cot, and Essence follows, taking one last look at the door before the member closes the curtain around them, sealing her in quiet solitude.

INT. HAVEN LIBRARY - AFTERNOON (DAYS LATER)

Essence sits alone at a wide, rustic table covered with open books and scrolls. Dust particles float between rays of light as a mass collection of books line the walls. Her gaze shifts between pages filled with illustrations of wraithroot—dark, invasive tendrils wrapping around diagrams of human figures—and stacks of recent notes from the Collective's healers.

In a separate stack, Essence has gathered texts on the Collective's lineage—old, faded entries on her grandmother and other members.

She sighs, closing the book in hand with an intentional thud as she looks down. The soft sound of footsteps appears, making her look up. Luce enters, carrying a couple of books under her arm, her expression gentler and perceptive.

LUCE

So, this is where you have been hiding?

ESSENCE

(sighing)

Hey—yeah.

Luce sets her books down on the table, lifting an open book with the tip of her finger and inspecting the title.

LUCE

Deep dive into wraithroot, I see.  
Finding anything useful?

Essence shakes her head, pushing the books aside.

ESSENCE

No, not at all. Everything recent talks about symptoms and spread, but the history is...well it's like no one really knew what they were dealing with back then, or it wasn't written down.

Luce takes a seat across from her, scanning the literature before her with an intent gaze.

LUCE

Waithroot hasn't surfaced in eons. For most of us, it was more legend than reality—a cautionary tale to keep young witches from tapping too deeply into magic. Much of what we originally know comes from the rarest of oral traditions.

Luce shrugs, flipping through one of the open books.

LUCE

But, a large game of telephone has never been a reputable source. If I were you, I'd ask Council member Adelina. She was the one who tasked your grandmother with finding a cure, plus she archives everything.

Essence takes in Luce's words, her fingers tracing the worn edges of the book in front of her.

ESSENCE

Have...they heard?

Essence looks up, her voice falling with uncertainty.

LUCE

Heard? Oh...they kind of hear everything, unfortunately. But they're all just relieved you're safe—and uninfected.

ESSENCE

Did they seem...disappointed?

Essence rises, picking up a handful of books and returning them to their proper spots on the shelf.

LUCE

Are you kidding me? Essence, the council knows what you and Zuri are up against. If anything, they're cautious, maybe even afraid of what wraithroot could mean for all of us. We've all made sacrifices, limiting our abilities to avoid infection. They are not disappointed, just...worried.

Essence nods, a hint of relief crossing her face. She pauses by the shelf, sliding the last book into place. Her gaze lingers on a nearby title, reading, *The Caliber of Remembrance*. Her fingers graze the spine before she carefully slides it free.

ESSENCE

Luce, you're...skilled with memory spells, right?

LUCE

I'd like to think I know a thing or two. Why do you ask?

Essence hesitates, running her fingers along the book's spine, weighing her words.

ESSENCE

Well, when I was in the In-Between, I saw...things. It's all mostly a blur; I only remember fragments, flashes.

Luce leans in, her curiosity piqued.

LUCE  
(eagerly)  
What did you see?

ESSENCE  
There's a phrase I can't quite get out  
of my head: *Iranti Olvidada*. It's  
almost like it's echoing, like a song  
on repeat.

Luce's expression shifts, a flicker of surprise passing over her face. She straightens, eyes narrowing slightly.

LUCE  
*Iranti Olvidada*. That sounds like two  
different languages, which isn't too  
out of the ordinary when you think  
about how the Collective has come to  
remain intact.

She stands, crossing to the library's towering shelves. Reaching up, she pulls out an old worn book with faded script along its spine, flipping through the pages with careful hands.

She pauses as her brow furrows, then glances over her shoulder at Essence.

LUCE  
Actually, follow me.

Luce guides Essence to the far end of the library, where a smaller, heavy wooden door stands, partially hidden by an overgrown plant. A plaque on the door read RESERVED COLLECTION. Luce checks around and then produces a small key from her pocket. With a quick glance, she slides it into the lock, and the door clicks open.

ESSENCE  
Are we supposed to be in here?

LUCE  
(amused)  
This is...not exactly encouraged, but  
the Council keeps more obscure texts in  
here. Mostly protected for "safe  
keeping."

INT. HAVEN'S LIBRARY - RESERVED COLLECTIONS - CONTINUOUS

Luce opens the door to reveal shelves lined with aged books, many with blank covers or fraying bindings. Essence follows her inside, sure to close the door behind her. The ceiling looms high above, shelves stretching up to touch it as Essence glances around, her fingers brushing a thin layer of dust on the table.

Luce sifts through shelves, muttering.

LUCE

There are texts in here that even the Council barely touches. We keep them for...historical purposes. You can thank Adelina for that.

Essence's eyes roam over the forgotten volumes—grimoires, journals, and more—all sectioned by the names of past members. Luce's hands pause, then hover over a small, weathered journal nestled between larger books. She pulls it out, dust dancing in the air.

LUCE

I think this might interest you.

She hands it to Essence, who runs her fingers over the worn leather. The cover bears faint etchings, and a strange symbol catches her eye—one she's only ever seen in fragments during her memories in the In-Between.

Essence opens the journal carefully. The pages are filled with her grandmother's handwriting, elegant yet hurried, spells, and notes scrawled in languages she barely recognizes. She flips through, and there it is—a page titled *Iranti Olvidada*, the words circled with urgency, the ink smudged slightly as if her grandmother had returned to it often.

ESSENCE

(barely audible)

It's real...

Luce leans over, peering at the page.

LUCE

It's rare to see spells like this. Look—these side notes, they're fragments from original texts. It seems

like she integrated mixed mediums from other sources.

Luce points at the words IRANTI, with an arrow beside it reading MEMORY and OLVIDADA pointing to FORGOTTEN.

Luce steps away, scouring the archive before she pulls out two thin, aged books from the shelf, each bound with intricate designs.

LUCE

These look to be the sources...One's Spanish, and...this one looks to be Yoruba. But, I can't translate them—not fully.

Essence's fingers trace over the script, and she flips a page, looking for more.

ESSENCE

This is...chaos magic, right?

LUCE

Yes, exactly. And chaos magic like this—layered, pieced together—can be incredibly unstable. Iranti Olvidada isn't just a memory spell; it's a forceful rewriting of one's entire essence.

ESSENCE

But, why would she go through all this work?

LUCE

You don't have any memories so painful you'd want to forget?

Essence sighs, her gaze dropping as she recalls something.

ESSENCE

They say trauma isn't just stored in memory. It lodges itself beyond the mind, into the body and spirit, hiding in places we don't even realize.

LUCE  
(smiling)  
Sometimes, forgetting can feel like the only way forward. But with magic like this...there's always a cost.

ESSENCE  
Forgetting is never the answer...

LUCE  
(laughing)  
Spoken like a true healer. All that research is paying off I see.

Luce begins packing up her things and Essence looks up.

ESSENCE  
Heading to check on Soren?

LUCE  
You know me so well...I'd do anything for that dumb, dumb boy.

Luce heads for the door but she pauses in her tracks.

ESSENCE  
Luce, thank you.

LUCE  
It's the least I can do, Essence.  
Maybe, you'll be ready to start our training sessions tomorrow?

Essence nods, a smile spreading across her face as Luce exits. Essence stands alone for a moment, holding the journal, fingers brushing along the faint etchings.

INT. HAVEN HALLWAY - EVENING

Essence walks down the dim hallway toward her room, her expression tired. Her grandmother's journal rests under her arm and the familiar buzz of her phone goes off. It lights up with a stream of texts from MAI.

MAI (TEXT)  
-- I still can't believe you left without telling me.

-- Ugh, what am I supposed to do  
without you???

-- When you get back, I expect all of  
the tea! Details, details!

-- Hey, you're out of cereal.

-- And milk.

Essence laughs at her friend's sporadic messages and begins to  
type back.

ESSENCE (TEXT)  
Mai, are you at my house?

MAI (TEXT)  
Definitely not...

ESSENCE  
Mhm, we'll talk when I get back.

MAI (TEXT)  
And when might that be?

ESSENCE (TEXT)  
Soon.

Just as Essence nears her door, she notices a figure lingering  
by it. Selene Sola, with her tall, graceful frame, stands with  
her back to the door, as if hesitant to intrude. She looks up at  
the sound of Essence's footsteps, offering a faint smile. As  
Essence sees the council member, she tucks the journal further  
under her arm.

SELENE SOLA  
Caught me, didn't you? I was debating  
whether to knock or just...let you  
rest.

ESSENCE  
Actually, I'm glad you're here. I've  
been trying to make sense of some  
stuff, and...maybe you could help.

Selene's expression softens.

SELENE SOLA  
Of course, it would be my pleasure.

Essence unlocks the door and gestures to Selene.

INT. HAVEN DWELLING - CONTINUOUS

Selene nods, momentarily hesitating before leading the way. The warm ambers of the evening sun spill through the windows, illuminating and bending light through the crystals that rest on the windowsill.

ESSENCE

Please, feel free to sit where you like.

SELENE SOLA

(nostalgic)

I haven't been in this room since the day your mother left...everything's just the same.

Selene glances around, one hand over her chest, her expression softening as she moves her gaze from walls to small trinkets left untouched. Her fingers pause on a small, faded photograph on the desk before she settles into an old, creaky chair. Essence places her belongings on the bed, tucking her grandmother's journal discreetly underneath, then takes a seat on the edge.

ESSENCE

What was she like back then, my mother?

SELENE SOLA

Oh, Evelyn was...radiant, so full of potential. She was an Iseda after all, and there's nothing in your legacy that speaks to anything less than excellence. She wanted so much to live up to that expectation; it just became too much.

ESSENCE

What became too much? Being a healer, an Iseda?

Selene's eyes grow distant as she shakes her head, recalling.

SELENE SOLA

Your mother was...complicated. She carried so much talent and yet so much rage, so much turmoil. Something changed as we got older, but she kept

it all hidden, never uttered a word. I think she thought if she just pushed it down, whatever she was feeling, and moved past it, things would work out.

ESSENCE

She wasn't happy here?

SELENE SOLA

I wouldn't quite say that. There were moments when she was and times when she tried to be. But Evelyn...longed for a life beyond all this. She yearned for normalcy, not responsibility.

ESSENCE

Do you think she found what she was looking for?

SELENE SOLA

I like to think so. After all, here you are, standing before my very eyes. You'd probably know better than I would.

ESSENCE

(laughing softly)

She's...a complicated one like you said.

SELENE SOLA

You know, Essence, we're all healers in a sense. We hold each other's burdens, mend wounds that aren't always visible. Some of us learn through science, or the properties of herbs, making our concoctions and remedies...but so few of us hold the actuality of it, that innate gift. Your lineage—it's rare, always has been, and it comes with its own weight. Whatever Evelyn was struggling with, I think she needed a simpler life, a chance to breathe and just...be herself, find herself.

A soft knock interrupts their conversation. Essence looks to the door as it creaks open, revealing Nix. Selene looks between them and rises, clearing her throat.

NIX

Oh, I can come back another time...

SELENE SOLA

No, no, we were just finishing up  
Phoenix.

Selene moves toward the door, but Essence calls out, rummaging through her belongings.

ESSENCE

Selene, uh, Council member Selene,  
wait...

Selene pauses as Essence holds out her mother's old childhood diary.

ESSENCE

This was my mother's. She would...write  
fondly of you. I think it'll be worth a  
read.

Selene's face softens, her hand hovering over the journal before she takes it gently, her eyes glistening.

SELENE SOLA

Thank you, Essence, dear. I'll take  
good care of it. And...if you ever want  
to talk more, just find me.

Essence nods, watching as Selene gives a final nod and steps past Nix, leaving the room with quiet dignity. Nix lingers by the door, glancing at Essence with a soft smile.

NIX

I thought...we could get out of here?

ESSENCE

Yeah, I could use a change of scenery.  
Where are we off to?

Essence grabs her coat from the back of a chair, tucking her hair behind her ears as she follows Nix out. She's grateful for the distraction. As they step into the hallway, Nix's playful energy seems to lift the air around them.

INT. HAVEN HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

They stop at the end of the hallway, where an archway is framed with shimmering, silvery runes.

NIX  
(grinning)  
After you, legend.

Essence shakes her head, a soft laugh escaping her.

ESSENCE  
I think you're still the only one who  
thinks that.

Essence takes a steadying breath and steps forward, feeling a warm rush as the portal materializes around her—a soft ripple, like stepping through a gentle wave.

EXT. HILLSIDE - EVENING - CONTINUOUS

Essence and Nix weave through a narrow path, brushing past low-hanging branches. The leaves rustle gently, and the branches seem to close behind them, shrouding them in a green canopy. Nix gently moves a branch out of Essence's way, glancing back with a playful smile.

NIX  
It's just a bit further, promise.

Essence smiles, her curiosity piqued. The path opens to a small clearing on the other side—a grassy hillside with a sprawling view of the city below. In the center, a blanket lies spread out with a small basket, and a couple of lanterns casting a warm glow over the setup. The city hums in the distance, lights sparkling like stars beneath the evening sky, creating a perfect, private vista.

ESSENCE  
(in awe)  
Nix, did you plan all this?

NIX  
I might've had a little time on my  
hands.

Essence steps close to the edge, taking a long look at the view.

ESSENCE

What's the occasion?

NIX

Uh, you? Just thought you deserved a break. Besides, you've been cooped up in the Haven for too long—figured you might need a reminder of what the world looks like beyond the chambers.

Essence's gaze softens, a small smile tugging at her lips as she looks out over the city, taking in the view.

ESSENCE

It's beautiful, thank you.

Nix sits down on the blanket, patting the spot next to them.

NIX

Come on, Legend. The city isn't going anywhere.

Essence makes a face as though she isn't amused, settling down beside Nix.

ESSENCE

(teasing)

Is that my new nickname? I always thought...it would be something cuter.

NIX

I think it's pretty cute, fits your beauty and talent.

ESSENCE

You're really leaning into this nickname thing, huh?

Nix shrugs, pulling items from the basket, a warm smile lingering. They uncork a bottle of wine, pouring some into both glasses.

NIX

Well, when you've got talent like yours, why not own it?

Her fingers trace the edge of the blanket, thoughtful. Nix holds a glass up to her and she takes it, swirling the contents gently.

ESSENCE

Sometimes, I'm not sure what my talents even are. Everyone else seems to know their place, their abilities, like Zuri or... even you. But me? Half the time, I feel like I'm just... winging it. What if, I'm just a one-hit-wonder?

Nix gives a soft chuckle.

NIX

A one-hit-wonder? Really? Now that's a new one. Everyone has their doubts, even legends. I know, I do. But trust me, you are anything but that.

ESSENCE

Yeah, how are you so sure?

NIX

You've got more in you than you're giving yourself credit for. You're just...discovering it. It's like learning to walk before you run.

Essence smiles, her fingers wrapping around the glass as she looks back at Nix.

ESSENCE

I think I'm starting to understand why my mother decided to leave. It feels like...everyone's waiting for me to live up to this...legacy. It's suffocating. What if-what if I can't?

Nix sets their glass down, leaning closer, their tone soft yet certain.

NIX

Then they're missing the point. You're not here to live up to anyone else's story. You're here to create your own- and trust me, I'm excited to be along for the ride. From what I can see, it's going to be a good one.

ESSENCE

Nix, are you always this positive?  
Like, a light at the end of the tunnel?

NIX

Only for those who need it most.

Essence shakes her head, a smile breaking through.

ESSENCE

Guess I fall into that category, huh?

NIX

You said it, not me.

ESSENCE

(laughing)

Yeah, yeah. Whatever. Now, what else is  
in that basket of yours?

Nix grins and reaches back into the basket.

NIX

Oh, just a few essentials. You know,  
some fruit, a bit of cheese, chocolate,  
and...

Nix pulls out a small sketchpad and a pencil, handing them over  
with a knowing smile.

NIX

...an artist's tools.

ESSENCE

(amused)

You really thought of everything,  
didn't you?

NIX

I might've had a hunch you'd want to  
capture the view.

Essence takes the tools, flipping through the blank pages as her  
fingers trace the edges, thoughtfully.

ESSENCE

(Sighing)

It feels like it's been ages since I've  
drawn anything.

Nix leans back, propping themselves up on one elbow as they watch her.

NIX

Then make the most of it. Just let it flow—whatever comes to mind.

Essence smiles, settling in as she starts sketching. She glances up occasionally, letting the scene and Nix's quiet presence sink in. The city lights twinkle below, and the sounds of distant traffic blend softly with the evening breeze.

After a moment, Essence pauses, studying Nix over the top of her sketchpad.

ESSENCE

(studying Nix's face)  
Hold still—don't move.

Nix chuckles, trying to keep still but looking slightly self-conscious.

NIX

Are you seriously drawing me right now?

ESSENCE

You brought the sketchpad. Fair game.

Nix laughs, but a warmth spreads across their face as Essence begins to sketch, capturing the subtle softness in their expression.

NIX

Okay, okay, but capture my good side, will you?

Essence grins, nodding her head.

ESSENCE

(playful)  
Mmm, that's going to be hard to choose.

Essence glances up, her gaze meeting Nix's. They hold each other's eyes for a lingering moment, the quiet weight of the evening settling around them.

Nix's smile softens, their gaze flickering over Essence's face as if committing each detail to memory.

NIX

I guess I'll have to trust the artist.

ESSENCE

I guess so.

Essence returns her focus back to her sketch, a soft smile lingering on her lips. Her hand moves with ease, sketching each line and shadow with delicate precision.

The night settles deeper around them, casting a cool, velvety blanket over the hillside. A faint fog rolls in, drifting across the cityscape below, blurring the distant lights into a soft, shimmering glow. Stars punctuate the sky above, their light muted by wisps of cloud.

Essence takes her last stroke and lowers the sketchpad, revealing her work to Nix.

ESSENCE

What do you think—

As her gaze lifts to see Nix's reaction, her words trail off. Nix's face lights up in awe, their lips parting slightly as they take in the sketch.

NIX

Wow, it's amazing, Essence. You really outdid yourself.

But Essence's attention drifts past them, her expression freezing as she catches sight of something beyond.

Standing just behind Nix, half-hidden in the mist is a young girl—around twelve years old—her eyes dark and intent as she watches Essence.

Essence's breath catches. She blinks, and the girl is gone, leaving only the quiet hum of the city below.

ESSENCE

(almost a whisper)

Mom?

Nix looks up, confused.

NIX

Huh?

Essence, what is it?

They follow her line of vision, looking over their shoulder and then back.

NIX  
Essence, what is it?

Essence blinks, pulling her focus back. A sense of unease settles over her.

ESSENCE  
(shaken)  
Something isn't right.

As she says this, her gaze drifts down to her phone lying on the blanket. She picks it up, and the screen lights up with missed calls and urgent messages. Essence's fingers tighten around her phone as she scans the screen, worry consuming her.

ESSENCE  
I need to go home.

Nix nods, instantly rising to their feet.

NIX  
Just think where, and take my hand.

Nix extends their hand, lifting Essence to her feet.

ESSENCE  
Just...where?

NIX  
Yes, focus on it. I'll take care of the rest.

With a steadying squeeze, Nix pulls Essence along, guiding her through the trees. As they reach the small clearing, a snap resounds—a silvery portal materializing in the air before them, casting a soft glow.

EXT. ESSENCE'S CHILDHOOD HOME - NIGHT

Essence and Nix step through the shimmering portal, arriving on the front lawn of her childhood home. The quiet suburban neighborhood lies under a blanket of night, with only a few streetlights illuminating the area. The house is dark except for a faint glow spilling from the kitchen window, casting long shadows on the lawn.

Essence's breath fogs in the cool night air as she hesitates, her gaze fixed on the familiar house. She takes a shaky breath, her fingers still wrapped around Nix's hand for reassurance. Her grip loosens as she steels herself, moving toward the front steps with Nix following closely behind.

INT. ESSENCE'S CHILDHOOD HOME - FOYER - CONTINUOUS

Essence steps inside, pausing as familiar surroundings settle over her. The quiet feels almost unnervingly heavy, pressing in with each step. The refrigerator hums softly in the kitchen, and a faint murmur of voices drifts from down the hall, grounding her in the familiar yet weighted atmosphere of home.

She exchanges a look with Nix, who nods supportively. Slowly, Essence moves forward, her footsteps muffled against the carpet. As they near the living room, her father, **LEONARDO SANTIAGO, LEO** for short, appears, his face weary, deep lines etched into his brow. His gaze meets Essence's, softening with a mixture of relief and worry.

LEO

Mija, thank god you're here. You don't know how to answer your phone now???

Leo embraces Essence, squeezing her tight before he pulls back, taking her in. He looks at her friend, smiling politely.

ESSENCE

Dad, what's going on? Where's Mom?

Leo's eyes drop momentarily before he gestures toward the hallway.

LEO

In the bedroom. She's been asking for you.

A pang of fear flickers across Essence's face. She glances at Nix, who nods, giving her hand a gentle squeeze before letting go.

INT. HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

Essence moves down the hall and along the walls hang family portraits—snapshots of milestones and everyday moments, faces smiling back from frozen memories. As she walks past, her gaze

catches on the cracked door of her old bedroom. Faint giggles seem to drift out, barely audible, as if echoing from a distant memory. She hesitates, peering inside, but the room is dark, untouched, and empty. A chill runs through her, but she pushes forward, leaving the lingering whispers behind.

As she nears her parents' bedroom, her hand hovers over the doorknob. She takes a breath, steadying herself before finally pushing it open.

INT. BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Her mother, Evelyn, lies on the bed, blankets pulled up to her chest, her skin pale and shadowed under the dim bedside lamp. Her breathing is shallow, each breath labored. Evelyn's eyes flutter open at the sound of Essence's entrance, a faint smile breaking across her face as she sees her daughter.

EVELYN  
(weakly)  
Essy...you came.

Essence forces a smile, stepping closer to the bed. She sits on the edge of the bed, trying to mask the worry in her eyes.

ESSENCE  
Of course, Mom. I would have come  
sooner if I knew you weren't feeling  
well.

Essence gingerly places the back of her palm on her mother's forehead, feeling her temperature.

ESSENCE  
Just a fever, yeah? A little rest, and  
you'll be back on your feet.

Essence pulls her hand away, nodding enthusiastically, trying to keep her voice light.

Evelyn's smile fades as she frees her hand from under the blankets. Slowly, she reaches out, her fingers brushing against Essence's hand, in a gentler, lingering squeeze. Essence's heart stirs, the comfort of her mother's touch briefly soothing her.

But as she glances down, her breath catches—the familiar black veins snake up her mother's wrist, faint but unmistakable, weaving across her skin like a dark, creeping shadow.

ESSENCE  
 (whispering, horrified)  
 Mom...

EVELYN  
 Shh, don't you start.

Essence swallows hard, her eyes glued to the dark veins, a mix of fear and anger simmering beneath the surface.

ESSENCE  
 You know what this is, don't you?

EVELYN  
 Ha, of course, I do. And it looks like you do too. When—when did you find out.

ESSENCE  
 Why didn't you tell me? About any of it?

Evelyn looks away, her face softened by resignation as she wrestles with the silence.

EVELYN  
 Because I wanted something different for you. I thought if I kept it from you, maybe you'd have a chance to live outside of all this.

Essence's hand trembles slightly as she pulls away from her mother's hand, her voice thick with a mixture of anger and hurt.

ESSENCE  
 But you didn't just keep this from me—you kept *everything* from me.

EVELYN  
 I thought I was sparing you. I thought...maybe if you didn't know, you could be free of it. All the history, the cost of knowing. Being an Iseda isn't easy.

ESSENCE  
 Nothing is easy. I had the right to know, Mom. All of it. Do you know how confusing this has been for me? Trying

to piece things together on my own? I mean, my whole life...

Evelyn closes her eyes briefly, fighting back tears.

EVELYN

You don't know the full extent of what you're asking, Essence. There are things...burdens, I hoped you'd never have to carry, to go through.

Essence's frustration hardens, her voice low but unwavering.

ESSENCE

But I'm *already* carrying them. Whether you wanted me to or not, don't you get it?

Evelyn's eyes open, a flicker of regret crossing her face. She tries to reach for Essence's hand again but falters, her body trembling. Suddenly, she doubles over in a violent cough, thick, dark gunk spilling onto the blanket. Essence's anger is replaced by fear.

ESSENCE

(alarmed)

Mom!

Essence moves closer, reaching out as Evelyn struggles for breath, her hands hover, unsure of how to help as her mother's cough subsides. Evelyn leans back, visibly weakened, wiping her mouth with a shaking hand. She manages a faint, strained smile, but her eyes avoid Essence's gaze, filled with pain and secrets left unsaid.

EVELYN

(hoarse)

I didn't want you to see me like this.

Essence's voice softens, fear and desperation mingling as she looks at her mother, her heart heavy.

ESSENCE

Mom, I can heal you. I'm an Iseda too. You don't have to do this alone—I can help.

Evelyn's eyes flicker with a hesitation, and she glances down, her voice barely audible.

EVELYN

By now, you must understand... healing me would only drain what strength you have left. And I need you to hold onto that strength.

ESSENCE

You would do the same for me. You know you would.

EVELYN

That's what mothers are for—to carry the weight...so you don't have to.

Evelyn studies her daughter, a mixture of pride and sorrow in her gaze, but just as she opens her mouth to say more, another wave of coughing overtakes her. This time, it's more intense—her body racked with pain as her hand clutches her chest.

Evelyn's body jerks with violent convulsions, her eyes rolling back as she begins to seize. Essence's heart pounds, panic overtaking her as she watches her mother's body twist and spasm.

ESSENCE

(desperate & alarmed)

No, stay with me!

Essence grabs her mother's shoulders, trying to stabilize her. With trembling hands, she takes a deep breath, grounding herself. Her hands quiver as she places them over her mother's chest, willing her energy to flow. A faint, warm glow begins to emit from her hands, pulsing softly against Evelyn's skin. Essence begins to mumble the incantation under her breath.

ESSENCE

Come on...come back to me. I can't lose you, now.

As she focuses, Essence's vision begins to shift. Shadows twist and pulse through her mother's veins—a tangled, dark root, invasive and almost alive. She stares, horrified, as it slithers up her mother's spirit.

The bedroom door swings open, and Nix and Essence's father, Leo, rush in.

ESSENCE

(rushing to her side)

Essence, stop! What are you doing?

Essence closes her eyes, shutting out Nix's voice. She breathes in deeper, pushing her energy further. Evelyn's soul shifts, a hint of light breaking through the darkness.

Suddenly, a faint figure emerges within the shadows—a young girl, around twelve, standing on the edge of Essence's vision. Her gaze is solemn, her eyes intense as she stares at Essence.

ESSENCE

Mom...

In a heartbeat, the girl vanishes, leaving only the lingering darkness. With one last surge of energy, Essence pushes back a fraction of the infection. Evelyn's body stills, her breathing steadying.

Essence sways, her face pale and drained as her mother slips into unconsciousness.

Nix and Leo kneel beside her, with Nix taking Evelyn's wrist, checking for a pulse.

NIX

(shaken with concern)

Do you have any idea what you just did?

The risk you put yourself in?

ESSENCE

I had to try. I have to save her. Nix,

I saw her. I saw her—young, standing

right there, like in the In-Between.

It's not meant to be this way.

Leo's face tightens with worry, his hand resting on Evelyn's, trying to comprehend.

LEO

Is she...is she going to be okay? Is she stable?

NIX  
(nodding)

For now, Mr. Santiago. We need to get you both to the Haven, Essence. This infection runs deep.

ESSENCE  
No, I'm not going anywhere.

Leo exchanges a look with Nix and just then, the front door creaks open. Mai's footsteps sound down the hall.

MAI (O.S.)  
Mr. Santiago, I'm here. I got the supplies you asked for.

She appears at the doorway, a grocery bag in hand, her cheerful expression faltering as she takes in the scene.

MAI  
Uh...what's going on?

Essence and Nix exchange a glance, Nix's face tensing as they straighten up. Leo remains near Evelyn's side, meeting Mai's gaze with a careful calm.

LEO  
Mai, Evelyn isn't doing very well.

Mai's face falls as she glances from Essence's pale face to Evelyn's unconscious form on the bed.

MAI  
Yeah, that's why I brought soup, Mr. Santiago.

Essence's gaze softens.

ESSENCE  
No, Mai. My mother is going to need a lot more than soup...she's dying.

Mai does a double take, looking over the whole scene. This time she sees the black veins covering Evelyn's body.

MAI  
(gulping)  
What can I do?

Essence's gaze softens and she pulls her friend in for a quick and tight embrace. As she releases her, Essence takes a steadying breath, her voice shifting into a tone of quiet command.

ESSENCE

Alright, here's what we need to do.  
Dad, just monitor her breathing—any change, even the slightest, just call me.

LEO

Oh, I'm not going anywhere, puchis.

Essence moves purposefully toward the door, with Nix and Mai close behind.

INT. HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

Essence strides down the hall, her expression focused and determined.

ESSENCE

Nix, I need you to get to the Haven and gather supplies. Tala will know what we're missing.

NIX

For the tea, right?

ESSENCE

—Exactly.

INT. KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

Essence moves without hesitation, her fingers tugging on cabinet knobs until she finds the molcajete, setting it on the counter.

MAI

Tea? Does anyone want to clue me in—just a little?

ESSENCE

There's no time, Mai. I promise I'll explain everything once we're through this.

Mai nods, watching as Nix heads out the front door. A sudden bright light sparks, followed by the familiar whoosh of an opening portal. The light filters through the cracked kitchen window, casting shifting patterns across the walls, while a gust of air stirs through the house.

Curious, Mai leans closer, peeking through the blinds. Her eyes widen slightly as she catches a glimpse of the swirling portal outside.

MAI  
(dazed)  
Did they just...

ESSENCE  
Yup.

Essence moves around her focus unbroken. She fills the kettle with water, places it on the stove, and lights the pilot.

ESSENCE  
Mai, help me find anything with calming or protective properties—chamomile, lavender, rosemary if we have it.

Mai nods, following Essence's lead as they rummage through the pantry and cabinets.

MAI  
You're really doing this, aren't you? I mean... magic and everything.

ESSENCE  
Yeah. I know it's a lot to take in, but it's our only shot.

Mai hands her a jar of dried lavender, watching her friend with a mixture of awe and worry. Essence begins to measure the herbs available, grinding them down with steady hands.

MAI  
Whatever you need, Ess. I've got you.

ESSENCE  
Thanks, Mai. I can't do this without you.

Essence pauses, her gaze drifting toward her bag on the chair. A thought dawns on her.

ESSENCE

(gesturing)

Take over with the grinding for a second?

Mai nods, stepping up to the counter and taking the pestle in hand. Essence crosses the kitchen, reaching into her bag to pull out her grandmother's journal. She flips through its pages until she lands on a familiar, handwritten recipe, her eyes softening as she traces the faded ink.

MAI

What's that?

ESSENCE

It's my Grandmother's.

She props the journal open on the counter beside Mai, scanning the ingredients list with a frustrated sigh.

MAI

What? What's wrong?

ESSENCE

We hardly have anything we need.

Then, the familiar flash of light returns, and Nix strides through the door, supplies in hand.

NIX

Your wish is my command.

INT. ESSENCE'S CHILDHOOD ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

The room is dimly lit, casting soft, wavering shadows across the walls. A series of candles are positioned around the room, their flames flickering as Mai lights them one by one, creating a protective circle. Nix carefully places the newly gathered herbs on the floor beside Essence, who sits cross-legged, her grandmother's journal opens in front of her.

Essence leans over the journal, her brow furrowed as she traces the faded ink of an incantation written by her grandmother. She mutters portions of it under her breath, piecing together fragments. Nix sits beside her, in thought.

NIX  
 (quietly)  
 This is...delicate work, Ess. You're  
 sure it's enough?

Essence glances up at Nix, determination set in her expression.

ESSENCE  
 It has to be. This spell...it's a mix.  
 If I can reverse it, I can undo what my  
 grandmother did to bury the pain. *Maybe*  
*I can go even deeper.* I think, whatever  
 she did, has affected us all in some  
 way.

Mai finishes lighting the last candle and stands back, watching  
 Essence with a blend of admiration and anxiety.

MAI  
 (taking a breath)  
 And this tea-it's what gets you there?

Essence nods, gesturing to the mixture of herbs now steeping in  
 a small teapot. The steam rises, filling the room with an  
 earthy, calming scent that blends with the candlelight.

ESSENCE  
 It'll induce sleep and an anchor to the  
 In-Between. It's a way to make the  
 connection smoother. But...reversing a  
 spell like this, it's a hunch at best.

She looks back to her grandmother's journal, fingers trembling  
 slightly as she follows the incantation's lines.

NIX  
 Essence, you know this is risky. You're  
 undoing layers of magic that  
 potentially span generations. Your  
 grandmother's pain, your mother's—all  
 of it flows through you.

ESSENCE  
 (whispering to self)  
 I know...but I can't shake the feeling  
 that something happened to me, to all  
 of us. These secrets, are preventing me  
 from being able to help my mother now,

the Collective. If I don't do something, we'll never come back from this...

Essence takes a deep breath, pouring a cup of tea. She brings it to her lips, hesitating for just a second, before drinking. The room falls silent as she sets the cup down, closes her eyes, and begins murmuring the incantation backward, her voice low and steady.

MAI  
(whispering to Nix)  
Is...is it working?

Before Nix can answer, Essence's breathing deepens, her shoulders relaxing as the space around her starts to shift, a subtle shimmer outlining her figure. She begins to slip away, her spirit opening to the In-Between.

Essence's eyes open briefly, catching a faint glimmer—a small figure standing near the doorway. A young girl, her dark eyes intense, watching her in silence.

ESSENCE  
(almost inaudible)  
Mom...

As the word leaves her lips, the young girl's head turns slightly, her gaze drifting behind her as another child darts past, laughter echoing softly. The scene blurs, and Essence's surroundings begin to dissolve.

With one last breath, Essence closes her eyes again, allowing the spell to carry her fully into the In-Between.

EXT. IN-BETWEEN - CONTINUOUS

Essence blinks, her eyes adjusting to the strange, dusky glow surrounding her. The ground beneath her feels soft, almost giving like the dense fog blanketing her steps. Shadows stretch and shift across the landscape, twisting with the faint echoes of children's laughter, as if carried on the wind from somewhere just out of sight.

She takes a tentative step forward, each movement slow and deliberate, the fog thickening, swirling around her ankles. The

familiar but distant voice calls out again, this time clearer, and her pulse quickens.

DISJOINTED VOICES

(whispering, playful,  
echoing)

Ready or not...

Essence halts, the words lingering in the air like an unwelcome memory. She glances over her shoulder, her heartbeat filling the silence, but finds only shadows closing in around her.

Ahead, faint figures come into focus—a trio of children running and weaving through the mist. She can just make out their faces: a young girl with intense dark eyes, a boy's shadowed profile, and a third child, faint and blurred. As she moves closer, she realizes the young girl is herself, her expression a mixture of innocence and fear.

YOUNG ESSENCE

(hushed, urgent)

We have to hide. Hurry!

Essence instinctively follows, her footsteps mirroring her younger self's as they dart between the faint outlines of trees and flickers of walls that seem to appear and disappear. Just as she's about to reach her younger self, the scene shifts again, bending and reshaping.

EXT. IN-BETWEEN - FIELD

Essence finds herself now in an open field, bright and boundless, a stark contrast to the claustrophobic fog. The field is scattered with remnants of her childhood—a doll with worn-out eyes, a cracked mirror, and scattered drawings. Her gaze lands on a single wardrobe standing alone in the middle of the field, its door ajar.

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Taking a deep breath, she steps forward, compelled by a strange familiarity, her heart pounding with each creak.

## DISJOINTED VOICES

Here I come...

With one last steadying breath, Essence reaches the wardrobe. She grips the edge of the door, her fingers trembling slightly, and steps inside.

INT. OLD CHILDHOOD ROOM - (MEMORY)

Essence steps forward, finding herself in a bedroom she doesn't recognize but instinctively knows is hers—a room from long ago, preserved in a layer of dust and memory. Toys lie scattered across the floor—stuffed animals, a wooden train set, and blocks with faded letters. Crayon drawings hang on the walls, their colors dulled but still bright with the naive innocence of childhood. A small bed sits in the corner, neatly made, with a beloved stuffed animal perched on the pillow, her name written in letters on the wall above.

Essence moves through the room slowly, her gaze softening as she takes in each detail. She picks up an old stuffed rabbit, its fur worn from countless hugs, and runs her thumb over its familiar stitched smile. Her heart aches with the sense of innocence this room holds—a memory of a time she's almost forgotten.

As she sets the rabbit down, a faint countdown begins, echoing through the walls.

YOUNG GIRL (O.S.)

(muffled)

...seven...eight...nine...

Essence's head turns, as she hears hurried footsteps outside the door. She steps back, her eyes widening as two children rush into the room—a young boy, about ten, leading a much younger version of herself by the hand. Her younger self's eyes are wide with excitement, a nervous smile on her face.

The boy glances around, looking for a place to hide, his eyes darting to the wardrobe.

YOUNG ESSENCE

(breathless giggles)

Quick, quick!

CUT TO:

INT. HIGH SCHOOL PARTY - NIGHT (MEMORY)

A teenage boy pulls a preteen Evelyn through a throng of people, a smile enveloping her face.

TEEN BOY  
(grinning)  
Quick, in here.

Evelyn stumbles into the cramped space, her back up against the wall. The boy leans in, his eyes lingering on her.

YOUNG EVELYN  
Do we have to be in here?

TEEN BOY  
Relax, no one's gonna find us in  
here...

He lifts a hand to her face, brushing her cheek. Evelyn's smile falters with uncertainty, her eyes darting to the door.

BACK TO:

INT. OLD CHILDHOOD ROOM - (MEMORY)

The young boy pulls Essence's hand, his grip tightening as he leads her toward the wardrobe. The sound of footsteps grow, echoing from the hallway outside.

YOUNG ESSENCE  
She's going to catch us!

The boy crouches down, meeting her gaze with a reassuring smile that feels both comforting and unnerving. His voice drops to a whisper, his tone serious.

YOUNG BOY  
Remember, you have to stay extra quiet,  
or she'll find us.

Young Essence nods eagerly, her face lighting up as she zips her lips shut, mimicking the gesture with a dramatic finger to her lips. He tugs her toward the wardrobe, both of them slipping inside, the door creaking as it closes.

CUT TO:

INT. PANTRY - (MEMORY)

Dim light filters through the small pantry, casting elongated shadows over rows of jars and canned goods. A young Lula Mae, holding a snack in her hand, jumps as a figure moves beside her, casting a menacing shadow across the wall.

UNCLE RORY  
(low and grave)  
Quiet, or she'll find us down here.

YOUNG LULA MAE  
Uncle Rory, you scared me. I was just  
grabbing a snack—

He steps closer, his face looming over hers, his stare heavy with such intensity, that it makes her flinch.

BACK TO:

INT. OLD CHILDHOOD ROOM - (MEMORY)

Inside, the wardrobe is cramped, shadows pressing in around them. The boy crouches beside her, watching her closely as she stifles a giggle, huddled next to him.

Then, the bedroom door creaks open. A girl, slightly older, steps in, her face obscured in shadow. She moves deliberately, each step slow and purposeful, her fingers brushing lightly along the wall as if savoring the power of the moment. She pauses just beyond the wardrobe, tilting her head as though listening for the faintest sound.

She crouches down, resting one hand against the wardrobe door. With a small, almost playful smile, she presses her ear to the wood, her fingers tapping a soft rhythm against the surface as if silently counting down.

YOUNG ESSENCE  
(whispering)  
What is she doing?

CUT TO:

INT. HIGH SCHOOL PARTY - NIGHT (MEMORY)

The teen boy's lips press forcibly against Evelyn's, his hands holding her head in place as he shoves his tongue in her mouth. She uses all her might to push him away.

YOUNG EVELYN

What are you doing? Stop.

TEEN BOY

(chuckles)

Don't tell me you are nervous now.

He pushes her further into the corner.

BACK TO:

INT. OLD CHILDHOOD ROOM - (MEMORY)

Young Essence looks up at the boy, eyes wide with confusion as he shifts closer, a subtle change in his expression that Essence recognizes now—a dark glint that sends a chill through her. Young Essence's smile fades, uncertainty creeping in as the older girl's shadow grows longer, stretching across the floor toward them.

The girl straightens, stepping back from the wardrobe, her shadow stretching across the floor toward them before she plops down on the floor, picking up a chipped tea set.

YOUNG ESSENCE

I—I don't want to play anymore...

YOUNG BOY

Shh, be still.

CUT TO:

INT. PANTRY - (MEMORY)

The sound of Uncle Rory's belt rattles in the dark of night as he unzips his pants.

UNCLE RORY

Just hold still, Lula Mae. We're just having some fun, right?

Uncle Rory pushes himself against young Lula Mae who fights back tears.

LULA MAE  
(choking)  
Please, stop.

EXT. IN-BETWEEN - CONTINUOUS

Essence stumbles back, falling out of the overlapping memories and into the misty, endless field of the In-Between. She collapses to her knees, gasping for breath.

She stares down at her hands, trembling, and then clenches them into fists, shaking her head violently.

From the mist, a soft, familiar hum drifts toward her—a melody she hasn't heard since she was a child. She looks up, her breath catching as an aged figure emerges slowly through the fog. Her grandmother, Lula Mae, appears before her, wrapped in gentle, ethereal light, her face lined with wisdom and weariness.

LULA MAE  
(softly, soothing)  
Hush now, child. You've seen what you came here to see. Now, you're going to want to see this.

Essence looks up, a spark of curiosity breaking through her pain and exhaustion. Lula Mae gives her a gentle nod, gesturing ahead as the sound of children's laughter fills the air.

Suddenly, a swarm appears around her, running past with gleeful abandon. Their laughter fills the air, bright and carefree, as they dart through the field.

Essence turns in circles, trying to keep track of the children, their laughter consuming her in an echoing embrace. They move too quickly, their forms a blur of color and motion, leaving her standing in the middle of the field, bewildered and intrigued.

Among the children, one figure slows, lingering near Lula Mae's long skirt. Essence's gaze settles on her—the young version of herself, no older than six, with wide, searching eyes and a soft, knowing expression.

YOUNG ESSENCE  
Grandma, who is that lady.

Lula Mae smiles, crouching down beside young Essence and tucking a curl behind her ear.

LULA MAE

Why don't you say hello, darling?

Young Essence glances up at her grandmother, then takes a few careful steps forward, curiosity lighting up her face. She looks at Essence with shy wonder, studying her as though she senses something familiar.

YOUNG ESSENCE

Hi...we have the same hair.

Essence's face softens, and she crouches down to meet her younger self at eye level, feeling a deep ache in her chest.

ESSENCE

We do, don't we?

Young Essence nods, reaching out with small hands to touch Essence's hair, her gaze filled with quiet wonder as she takes her in.

YOUNG ESSENCE

And the same freckles!

ESSENCE

You are absolutely right.

Essence's eyes well up with tears, her voice choking.

YOUNG ESSENCE

(in a whisper)

Mommy, says it's okay to cry. It's not your fault.

A soft smile breaks through her tears as she nods, feeling a surge of acceptance and peace. She gently pulls her younger self into a warm embrace, her eyes closing.

ESSENCE

Thank you, for reminding me.

As they hold each other, Young Essence begins to fade, dissolving gently within the hug until Essence is left alone, her arms wrapped around herself. She opens her eyes, momentarily alarmed, looking down and realizing she's only holding herself.

She glances around and then up at her grandmother, her voice tinged with worry.

ESSENCE

Where'd she go?

Lula Mae smiles, stepping closer and placing a gentle hand over Essence's heart.

LULA MAE

To where she was always meant to be, of course.

Essence's gaze softens, her hand coming up to rest over her heart.

From afar, a familiar pubescent voice calls.

YOUNG SOREN

Essence, are you coming?

Essence looks up, her calm, renewed expression meeting Soren's call, as her grandmother gives her shoulder a gentle squeeze.

LULA MAE

Not now dear, Essence has some unfinished business to tend to, but she'll be back.

Essence smiles, a sense of peace and belonging filling her. Just then, a young Zuri appears over a small hill, her voice carrying across the field.

YOUNG ZURI

(impatiently)

Soren, hurry up! You're missing it!

Essence watches them disappear into the mist, a soft smile on her face, feeling both grounded and inspired.

ESSENCE

(to self)

And, I'll be bringing some friends, apparently.

Lula Mae clears her throat, her face turning serious.

LULA MAE

Essence, you must hurry. Evelyn doesn't have much longer...

Essence's face tightens with determination as she nods, ready to return to the real world. She takes a deep breath, beginning to turn away, but she halts mid-step. She turns back, wrapping her grandmother in a deep embrace.

ESSENCE

(whisper)

Grandma, I wish I got to know you.

Lula Mae smiles, her eyes filled with understanding and love.

LULA MAE

(softly)

There's all the time in the world, child. This is the In-Between, after all.

Essence closes her eyes, savoring the warmth of the hug, letting it linger.

INT. ESSENCE'S CHILDHOOD ROOM - EARLY MORNING

Essence's eyes flutter open, the soft glow of dawn filtering through the curtains. She blinks, adjusting to her surroundings, realizing she's back in her childhood room that's full of teen angst.

As she shifts, she notices two figures beside her. Mai is slumped in her old bed, fast asleep. Nix sits on the floor, leaning back against the wall with his eyes closed as if he's been keeping watch.

Essence takes a quiet, deep breath, a gentle smile tugging at her lips as she looks at them both, feeling a profound sense of relief and gratitude.

MAI

(stirring, groggy)

Ess? You're awake?

Nix's eyes snap open, their face lighting up with a mix of concern and relief.

NIX

You're back.

Essence sits up slowly, her hand instinctively moving to her chest, over her heart, where the warmth of her experience in the In-Between still lingers.

ESSENCE

We are.

Mai and Nix exchange a look, waiting for her to say more, both of them holding space for whatever she needs.

Essence rises, alarmed.

ESSENCE

How is she?

CUT TO:

INT. HAVEN'S INFIRMARY - MOMENTS LATER

In the calm stillness of the infirmary, Essence approaches her mother's bedside. Her father, Leo, is already there, holding his wife's hand, his face lined with worry but softened with hope.

A member of the Collective checks Evelyn's vitals and then turns to Essence with a gentle nod.

MEMBER 1

She's in great condition. It might take a moment for her to wake up, but her vitals are extraordinary. You got to her just in time.

Nearby, Selene Sola stands watching, a respectful distance from the family. Essence catches her eye and gives a small nod, motioning her forward.

Selene steps closer, and Leo looks up, his gaze meeting hers. He stands, extending a hand.

LEO

Hola-hello. I'm Leonardo, Evelyn's husband.

Selene takes his hand with a warm smile.

SELENE SOLA

Selene Sola. I'm with the  
Collective...and well, I'm a very old  
friend.

They exchange a look of mutual respect, and Selene's reassuring presence seems to calm Leo. Essence watches the exchange, a quiet smile on her face when suddenly a loud, joyful shriek cuts through the calm of the infirmary.

LUCE (O.S.)

Soren! You're awake!

Essence and Malik both turn, catching a glimpse of Soren blinking groggily as Luce hovers over him, ecstatic, practically bouncing with joy. Soren manages a small, confused smile, clearly dazed but conscious, his color looking better than before.

Essence's smile widens, relief settling in her chest as she watches Luce's joyful reaction. Malik gives her an approving nod, his eyes warm with pride.

MALIK

He's tougher than he looks, that one.

Without hesitation, Malik crosses to Soren's side, placing a steadying hand on his shoulder.

Essence's gaze shifts to a corner of the infirmary, where she notices Zuri, finally taking a breather away from the patients she's been tending to all day. Zuri leans against a counter, her arms crossed, a rare moment of calm on her face.

ESSENCE

Zuri.

Zuri looks up, her expression initially blank as she registers Essence's presence. Then, a faint smirk tugs at her lips.

ZURI

Guess there really is a legend after  
all.

Essence smiles, undeterred by Zuri's guarded demeanor. She steps closer, her voice warm.

ESSENCE

I can teach you if you're up for it.

Zuri raises an eyebrow, crossing her arms, a hint of skepticism still in her eyes.

ZURI  
Oh, really?

Essence nods, meeting Zuri's gaze steadily.

ESSENCE  
Yeah, it only takes a bit of  
grounding...and a small trip.

ZURI  
A trip to where?

A flicker of something shifts in Zuri's expression, but she fights it, keeping her face composed. She finally lets a small smile slip through, almost reluctant.

ESSENCE  
Mmm, we'll start training, say,  
tomorrow?

Zuri laughs for the first time with Essence.

ZURI  
We'll see about that.

ESSENCE  
It'll be well worth your while, I  
promise. Us healers have to stick  
together, right?

Zuri chuckles, rolling her eyes slightly but smiling. Essence gives her a final nod before turning to exit the infirmary.

INT. HAVEN HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

As she steps out, she almost bumps into Mai, who's wide-eyed, taking in the sights around her. She throws her arms up in surprise.

MAI  
(grinning)  
Ess! You hid all of this from me? It's  
amazing here!

Essence laughs, watching Mai's excitement as she glances around, marveling at the Haven's unique energy.

ESSENCE

Yeah...I have been keeping a few secrets.

Mai nudges her playfully, her voice dropping to a more serious tone.

MAI

Well, don't think you're off the hook. You're telling me *everything*.

ESSENCE

As I said I would, but first, let's get you a proper tour.

Mai links her arm with Essence's, her face lighting up as they walk together, laughter trailing behind them.

MAI

Oh! I heard they have a training hall with actual magic duels...can we see that first?

Essence chuckles, nodding as Mai's enthusiasm bubbles over.

ESSENCE

You're really embracing this whole otherworldly thing, huh?

MAI

Are you kidding me? I want to see *everything*. The potion room, your cauldron, the enchanted garden...all of it! Plus, if we start at the magic duels, I might meet my future husband!

Essence laughs, pulling her friend along as they wander through the Haven, Mai's wide-eyed excitement bringing a lightness to the moment.

ESSENCE

Alright, alright. Magic duels, potions, and enchanted gardens coming up. But Mai, I hate to burst your bubble, men don't have any powers here.

MAI  
(shocked)  
Wait—seriously? Men don't have powers here? That's amazing! Imagine...a whole world where women run the magic.

ESSENCE  
I mean, they still do plenty, you know, the grunt work, but the magic? That's all us.

MAI  
Ess, I think I've found my new favorite place.

They share a laugh as they continue through the Haven, Mai's amazement and excitement bringing a renewed energy to Essence's journey.

Just then, Nix approaches, clearing their throat with a slight smirk.

NIX  
Mind if I steal Essence for a bit?

Mai raises an eyebrow, looking between them.

MAI  
Oh, *stealing* now, are we?

NIX  
She seems to be in high demand, but I promise to return her in proper condition.

MAI  
(smiling)  
You have a deal, Nix was it?

Mai extends her hand playfully and Nix takes it, nodding.

ESSENCE  
I'm literally standing right here, you two.

NIX  
Oh, I know. I couldn't miss the outstanding legend, herself.

Essence rolls her eyes, but a smile breaks through as Nix pulls her away.

INT. GROVE - MOMENTS LATER

Nix guides Essence to a quiet clearing surrounded by tall trees nestled behind the Haven. It's a brick building in hindsight as sunlight filters through the leaves, casting dappled shadows across the ground as the sun begins to fall. The grass beneath their feet is soft, mixed with patches of wildflowers and herbs that seem to grow naturally around the area.

NIX

Alright, I have one question for the legendary Essence Iseda.

ESSENCE

Yeah, what's that?

NIX

What's the plan now?

Essence pauses, then lets out a laugh, shaking her head.

ESSENCE

You brought me all the way out here to ask me that?

Nix grins, shrugging.

NIX

Some conversations deserve their own space, don't you think?

Essence's smile fades into a thoughtful expression, taking in the peaceful surroundings. She looks at Nix, a serious resolve in her eyes.

ESSENCE

My work's not done here just yet. I still need to figure out what wraithroot really is—what's feeding it, how it works, its origins. Without a stable cure, we're just treating symptoms. And with only three healers left in the Collective...

Nix listens closely, their gaze intent.

ESSENCE

(continuing)

...well, they've got some healing to do themselves. Until they're ready, they can't even start to face wraithroot.

Nix nods, absorbing her words, then hesitates for a moment before speaking.

NIX

So... do you think you'll have some time for me in this new plan of yours?

Essence glances at them, a soft smile forming as she leans in slightly.

ESSENCE

I guess you'll just have to believe in the magic.

Essence and Nix share a lingering look, the quiet strength of their connection settling over them. A soft breeze stirs, carrying with it the sounds of distant laughter.

Essence's expression shifts, a playful glint in her eye as she steps back.

ESSENCE

(grinning)

Catch me if you can.

Before Nix can respond, she reaches out and playfully tags them, then spins around, darting off between the trees with a laugh. Nix laughs, watching her go before breaking into a run to follow.

CUT TO:

EXT. IN-BETWEEN - FIELD

Essence runs through an endless field, her laughter echoing around her. She's no longer alone—children run alongside her, their forms light and free, their faces familiar.

Ahead, her mother stands, watching her with a warm, proud smile. Her grandmother is there too, joined by young Lula Mae, who laughs as she spins in circles with a group of children.

Essence slows, taking it all in. Soren stands nearby, his adult self fully present, his face filled with peace. Zuri is there as well, her arm draped around her own younger self, both of them laughing together. Other children of the Collective play around them, filling the field with joy.

ZURI

You know, I don't remember being this snarky.

Everyone laughs, their voices carrying through the field, a sound full of warmth and unity.

Essence stands at the center of it all, her face alight with peace and joy, surrounded by the family and friends who have shaped her journey.

FADE OUT.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> A screenplay, also referred to as a script, is a written document that outlines the dialogue, actions, settings, and overall structure of a film or television show. It serves as the blueprint or skeleton for the production, guiding directors, actors, and crew members in bringing the story to life on screen.

<sup>2</sup> Author Irene Lara created this compound to challenge and decolonize the West's division of body, mind, and spirit as indigenous thought views the bodymindspirit as a whole. Also see Lara 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Curanderismo originates from the Spanish word *curar*, meaning 'to heal' (Trotter and Chavira 1). It embodies a rich history of Latin American shamanic and traditional practices, weaving together diverse healing techniques, herbal remedies, spiritual rituals, and indigenous beliefs, practices, and methodologies. This approach addresses a spectrum of afflictions, including mental (mind), physical (body), and spiritual ailments. Curanderismo is often an amalgamation of eclectic, holistic, spiritual, and scientific understandings, drawing from a multitude of cultural influences such as Judeo-Christian, indigenous, Spanish, Western, and African traditions (Buenaflor 1; Maduro 869).

<sup>4</sup> See Davis' *Women, Race, and Class* 1981.

<sup>5</sup> As defined by Collins, controlling images are stereotypes and representations used to shape and control the behavior and perception of certain groups in society. Controlling images are solely designed to "make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life" (69). See *Black Feminist Thought*, "Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images.

<sup>6</sup> Lorde defines the mythical norm as “white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure.” See Lorde’s, “Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference.”

<sup>7</sup> These caricatures are understood as: 1) The Jezebel is a racist image portraying Black women as promiscuous, hypersexual, and hypersexualized, perpetuating harmful stereotypes that objectify and diminish their humanity. 2) The Mammy depicts Black women as the faithful, obedient, loyal, and nurturing domestic servant eager to cater to her white family. 3) The Matriarch symbolizes the mother figure in Black homes, known as the failed mammy. She is a Black woman portrayed as domineering and controlling within her household, often devoid of warmth and tenderness. 4) The Sapphire is a Black woman characterized as angry, aggressive, sassy, loud, rude, nagging, mean, abusive, and emasculating to Black men as she defies traditional gender norms.

<sup>8</sup> Adultification can appear in two imperative dispositions: 1) as precocious maturity in children that are shaped by social implications, and 2) as stereotypical prejudices, particularly those rooted in racism (Epstein et al.). In other words, it is a form of racial prejudice where minority children, typically Black children, are treated by adults as being more mature than they are.

<sup>9</sup> Sekou Mims defines post-traumatic slavery disorder as the traumatic effects caused by the displacement of Africans during the slave trade (20). See *Post Traumatic Slavery Disorder: Definition, Diagnosis and Treatment* 2005.

<sup>10</sup> Coined in 2005 by Joy DeGruy, Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS) is explained as the multigenerational transmission of past traumas like slavery, and on-going systemic

traumas. See *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing* (2005).

<sup>11</sup> Residual Effects of Slavery (RES) refers to the enduring effects of racist treatment towards African Americans, spanning from the era of slavery to the present day, showing how this violence has reverberated across generations (15). See “Residual effects of slavery: What clinicians need to know” in *Contemporary Family Therapy* (2013).

<sup>12</sup> Misogynoir, coined by author Moya Bailey in 2008, describes anti-Black racist sexism, like misogyny, but illuminated through race and gender, especially that of Black women. See *Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women's Digital Resistance* 2021.

<sup>13</sup> *Destierro* refers to the “dispossession of spiritual syncretic practices, alienation from the body, refusal of memories, and the physical deprivation of land” as noted in “After the Hurricane: Afro-Latina Decolonial Feminisms and *Destierro*” by Yomaira Figueroa (226).

<sup>14</sup> Conocimiento translates to the English word knowledge. However, Gloria Anzaldúa uses it in a more expansive way, translating it to ideas of knowledge, consciousness, and love that initiates the journey between self and creativity (40). See *Light in the Dark: Luz En Lo Oscuro* p. 243.

<sup>15</sup> See 2023 Entertainment Diversity Progress Report, p. 4.

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