

LOVE AND WORLD EATERS

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Aliah went statue-still as the immensely large and valuable urn wobbled violently.

She'd only bumped against the shelf the urn was on—and not the urn itself—but the impact had been enough to set the relic from ancient Greece vibrating like a dropped penny flopping on the floor. Even if her gloved hands hadn't already been clutched around another (much smaller) artifact, she wouldn't have tried to steady the enormous urn; she didn't trust herself to do anything but watch.

And pray.

And hope desperately that the painted figures on the urn's surface really were starting to gyrate less and less like figures in a flipbook...

Mercifully, the urn eventually stopped shaking. Aliah exhaled with enough force to blow her dark bangs from the right side of her forehead to the left. Breaking a small artifact would have been bad enough, but shattering an *irreplaceable* example of ancient pottery-making... That would have been a disaster. For both her self-respect and her chances of continued employment at the Chicago Field Museum.

But the potential catastrophe had averted itself, and she still had two more lots of artifacts to photograph today. So with an effort, Aliah started moving again, carefully setting the small artifact she'd been clinging to—a cute Tuscan bowl—on her padded cart.

Telling herself everything would be fine if she slowed down and kept her lumbering bulk in check, she started inching the cart towards the next aisle on her list. Normally she was pretty careful, even excruciatingly so... But the rush to get everything ready for the upcoming World Eaters exhibition had churned her and the rest of the Anthropology department into a frenzy. Registration was cataloguing new and loaned additions at a breakneck pace; Conservation was working overtime to restore damaged artifacts selected for display; and Collections—the division in which Aliah served as a temporary peon—was running around like an army of headless chickens in its haste to pull the needed items from storage.

Hence her scurrying in and out of basement aisles at a stupidly fast pace.

At least no one else had seen her hit the urn; things were too crazy for partners right now. Usually staff worked in pairs to gather artifacts from the museum's various storage areas. The most delicate artifacts always seemed to require a ladder, and it was easier to have one person read (and re-read) each object's location from the database printout while the other person kept his or her hands free for carrying.

As she brought the cart to a halt, Aliah was reminded again of how the larger storage rooms made her feel like she was in the warehouse at the end of the first Indiana Jones movie: both areas were cavernous, stuffed with acres of tightly packed shelves, and utterly dark when the lights were turned off (in the museum's case, to minimize light degradation). There weren't any boxes here, though. Aside from a few small pieces stuffed away in lockable drawers, everything was in the open, visible to museum staff and no one else. The artifacts on display in the public area were cool enough, but they were literally only the tip of the iceberg... The real treasures were down here in the "dungeons."

And Aliah loved that.

Maybe it was snobby and insiderish, but every time she wandered through a storage area she saw something new... Like this little cylindrical bone bead lying beside the next urn she was supposed to pull. It wasn't on her World Eaters list—no one had identified the bead as having any connection to history's great conquerors—but something about the elegant simplicity of its foreign inscription called to her.

A door opened, and Aliah started slightly, trying not to look guilty. The noise had come from above, though; the floor between these two storage areas was only a thick grate, which meant it was easy to tell which level people were on. And Gavin—it had to be him; she could hear Metallica leaking from his headphones even at this distance—was clearly upstairs, tending to his own task.

So he couldn't see her break the rules.

The best part of being behind the scenes was that you could touch the artifacts that interested you. You weren't supposed to, of course. And she never handled anything that looked fragile. But now and then she indulged herself by picking up something fascinating and taking the time to observe it from all angles... Besides, she'd already had her clumsy moment for the day; this would be a good way to get over herself.

Stooping slightly, Aliah slid one gloved hand gently under the bead while her other hand supported it from behind. As she stood, she noted that for something made of old bone, the bead seemed remarkably well preserved—

It twitched.

Aliah froze for the second time in as many minutes, but this time pretending to be a statue didn't help: the bead twitched again, and then *slithered* off her palm.

She'd almost found the breath to scream when the bead landed on her foot through a gap in her Birkenstocks. The contact brought a sudden stab of pain and a rush of foreign images...

...An older man kisses a younger in an opulent bed while sliding a ring onto his junior's finger...

...The young man yells a drunken protest as several stable-hands hold him down for a gang rape...

...The young man breaks from a crowd to run up behind the old man and stab him in the neck before the elder can finish turning...

...The young man is dead, nailed to a cross and drained of blood by a spear-wound in his side...

...Her scream finally came, and Aliah used its volume to clear the unwelcome montage from her mind. The images had only played for an instant—the bead was just now bouncing off her foot—but she was still too paralyzed to even consider catching the fragile object before it clattered on the floor.

Especially when she saw what the bone artifact had left in her foot: a wafer-thin splinter that wriggled once, slid under her skin, and *swam* away in her bloodstream.

She blacked out to the sound of urgent footsteps and Metallica's increasingly loud "Enter Sandman."

* * *

Theresa had already spent the last five minutes poking skeptically with her extremely sharp tweezers, and the look on her face suggested she wasn't going to do any more probing, no matter what Aliah said. "I'm pretty sure everything's out of there... You're probably just feeling a phantom pain or something. I'd be more worried about arsenic."

Aliah stared hard again at her now slightly bloody foot, trying and failing to find evidence that there was still a bone splinter *inside* her... And wondering if it wouldn't be better if she'd

just hallucinated, if the whole artifact-coming-to-life-thing had just been a stress-induced mirage brought on by nearly breaking something priceless and then actually breaking something else... Theresa probably wouldn't care either way. She was only worried about running Conservation with an iron fist, keeping her safety record spotless, and staying pretty. "When will we know if the...if I do need to be worried?"

"Arsenic tests usually take a few days to get back," Theresa replied as she turned away with efficient grace, her blonde hair dangling long and perfect behind her. "So probably not until after the weekend. But it's not a big deal: you couldn't have been exposed to much from something so small."

Aliah furrowed her eyebrows at Theresa's back as the head conservator tidied up her first-aid kit. Hadn't she just said arsenic *was* something to worry about? It was one of the main reasons they wore gloves. (Another was to safeguard the artifacts from the oils of human skin.) Back in the fifties or so, large parts of the collection had been sprayed with the chemical in a misguided attempt to protect against pests. Bug damage was still a big deal today—staff members were required to catch or kill any insects they saw, and then file a report—but coating artifacts with known poisons was a thing of the past.

The aftereffects weren't, though.

But...Theresa was probably just mad that a new artifact had been added to her queue of things to fix; the slightly fractured bone bead was on a tray at the far end of the conservation lab, one of a hundred objects in need of attention. Gavin and his headphones had gone back for the bead after he'd patiently helped Aliah out of the storage area and into the elevator. When he'd turned her and the damaged artifact over to Theresa, she'd flashed him a long-suffering look that all but said "what a spaz." It had reminded Aliah way too much of her parents.

She closed her eyes as Theresa applied an alcohol swab. To make matters worse, the conservator's first attentions had all been directed at the bead. Only after she was satisfied that the artifact was salvageable did she pretend to give two shits about—

Aliah could tell where the bead was, even without being able to see it.

Her eyes flew open. It had felt like there was a...connection between herself and the bead, some sort of invisible bond.

She fled the lab as soon as Theresa handed her a Band-Aid.

* * *

Aliah's cart wasn't far from where she'd left it.

At some point during the past week (which she'd spent avoiding this storage area), someone had moved the "tray-on-wheels" against the far wall to clear the main passageway. The artifacts she'd gathered before she'd dropped the bead were still there, waiting to be photographed as if nothing happened.

And since those inexplicable few moments, nothing had.

Probably because she'd gone well out of her way to make sure nothing did: Aliah had spent the last several days doing everything she could to avoid handling actual artifacts, mostly by catching up on image editing and organizing. She'd even volunteered to help Belinda, the head registrar, do some rote data entry for the coming move to the new underground storage area, the state-of-the-art facility that would supposedly make issues like climate and pest control disappear. Aliah couldn't justify more than a day of busy-work, though; Belinda had been appreciative, but the World Eaters grant which funded Aliah's photography ran out at the end of

the summer, and if she blew that exhibit's deadline...she wouldn't have even a chance of staying on.

Which would probably mean crawling back to her parents for help paying rent on the tiny studio apartment she could barely afford as it was...Aliah shook her head determinedly. To make sure that didn't happen, she had to suck it up and get back to work.

Despite an involuntary shudder, she made herself grab hold of the cart's handles and maneuver it back to the aisle where she'd left off. Consulting the database printout on the cart, she identified the next object she needed—a small knife—and forced herself to go find it. Once she had, Aliah lifted the blade off its shelf with painstaking, fearful care, cradled it to the cart, and set it down as if it were a newborn. So far, so good...Feeling more confident, she did the same in the next aisle, and the one after that, until her cart was full and it was time to start photographing.

Her equipment was where she'd left it, too, undisturbed at the back of the next storage area. It wasn't an ideal setup—whenever someone was working in the room above, their light filtered down through the grated ceiling and played minor havoc with her camera's settings—but it wasn't bad: Aliah had a decent tripod, a much more expensive Nikon than she had at home, ridiculously nice shoot lights, and more backdrops and staging props than she knew what to do with. It felt good to be in her element again. Here, away from everyone else, she didn't have to worry about looking fatter or sounding duller than the other Collection girls.

She'd definitely stayed away longer than she should have.

Settling into the familiar routine, Aliah began assembly-lining the artifacts on the cart through the image capture process: objects that needed overhead shots first, smallest to largest (to minimize tripod adjustments); then those that needed head-on shots, in the same order; between each object, an in-shot label; after each object, a checkmark on her list...

Within a few minutes, Aliah was so completely on autopilot that when she took off her right glove to adjust the camera's focus on a bronze oil scraper, she forgot to put the glove back on before reaching out to adjust the scraper itself. She realized her mistake as her fingers touched the object's bronze handle and another series of flashbacks immediately flooded her vision...

...A young serving girl rubs the scraper sensuously down a fat man's back before moving in to start a massage...

...A young boy does the same for a thin man...

...An aging matriarch hurls the scraper at an equally old—

Aliah jumped back as if burned, and the images stopped...the instant she was no longer in contact with the scraper. She clung hard to this observation, using it as an anchor against her rising tide of panic, rolling the thought over in her mind as she hugged her arms around her chest and scooted up against the far wall...Until the realization helped her wonder overcome her fear, and she found herself back in front of the scraper.

As a final, tentative test, she touched the object with the hand that was still gloved.

Nothing, just as she'd started to expect.

So after taking a deep breath, Aliah touched the scraper once more with her bare hand. And as soon as her skin brushed bronze again, the foreign scenes rushed back. Fully awed now, she let the images wash over her for several minutes. Vignettes of love, hate, friendship...Countless moments, involving dozens of people...All of which revolved around the scraper in one way or another.

Finally, Aliah stepped away, drained yet tingling with excitement. It didn't make sense—she couldn't even swear she was awake—but if she could view one...make that *two* artifacts' histories...Then why not more? Her gaze turned to the other objects on the cart as she ripped off her remaining glove.

The ring remembered every proposal, every acceptance, and every rejection.

The vases recalled being gifted in love and thrown in anger.

And the weapons...The weapons recounted every savage swing and brutal impact. She didn't linger on them.

The memories were too jumbled to fully comprehend, filled with dialogue in too many languages she didn't speak and permeated by too many smells she didn't recognize...But as she sat in her chair to collect herself, Aliah thought she had at least one thing figured out: these scenes she could...see...were all emotionally charged in some way. It was as if every instance of human—or in some cases even animal—sentiment the objects had been exposed to was seared into their inanimate structures.

Which meant there were literally lifetimes of remembrances just on the shelves within ten feet of her. And in the museum as a whole...The possibilities were truly mind blowing. Somehow, she'd acquired a unique insight, a historical perspective that could shed light on the myriad daily details people never bothered to record, an angle that—

That she couldn't explain having.

That originated last week for no apparent reason when the bone bead came to life just long enough to break itself on—and in—her foot.

Standing up abruptly, Aliah reassumed her gloves, briskly tidied up her artifacts, and headed for the elevator with a pounding heart.

* * *

She had to wait until lunchtime before she could get the conversation lab to herself. It only meant standing around for five minutes—it was 11:55 when she got off the elevator—but it felt like an eternity. To keep from going nuts, Aliah occupied herself by thoroughly washing her hands and fabricating an alibi for why she'd be poking at priceless objects in the lab. The best excuse she could come up with was printing off a few database spreadsheets so she could pretend she was trying to hunt down missing artifacts; not a great story, but some three to five percent of the collection was mislabeled or improperly shelved...so a treasure hunt was vaguely plausible.

When the noon rush began, Aliah did her best to watch the lab door inconspicuously and count the conservators as they exited. It wasn't hard; for once she was glad no one ever noticed her. Terry was the last to leave. After the head conservator joined her clique-of-the-moment in the break room, Aliah steeled herself and slipped into the lab. She felt incredibly nervous, but it helped that she didn't have to overcome any locks; while getting into the anthropology wing took an electronic ID card, once inside, you had access to everything (except for the storage areas, which took a separate swipe).

Of course, the open door also meant she wouldn't have any warning if someone came into the lab before lunch was over. But that's why she had an airtight alibi, right?

Right...

The bone bead was exactly where she'd seen it last. Thankfully—Aliah hadn't thought through what her plan would be if the bead had been moved. But it was on the same table...and that meant it was moment-of-truth time.

Biting her lip, Aliah looked around to make sure she was alone, turned back to the bead...and then looked around again. Cursing softly, she told herself to stop stalling, peeled off her right glove, and positioned the database sheets so her hand would be hidden from the door. Finally, with a shudder and a swallow, she reached out and touched the cylindrical bead again.

The same chaos of rape, murder, and crucifixion immediately assailed her. But the images were stronger this time, lasting longer and hitting harder as Aliah made herself maintain contact. Other scenes started to filter in as well, memories of the young man pleading, yelling, taking a knife to himself...

There were too many images coming now. Too many, too fast, too forcefully for her to process. Overwhelmed, Aliah tried to wrest control back from the bead by focusing on one scene. The murder had the most distinctive surroundings; with a supreme effort, she managed to pull the moment into the foreground of her vision and push aside everything else...

...Between the folds of two enormous red curtains, a throng of people—European people—take their seats in a majestic theater. Most look jubilant, or drunk, or both, but a few seem ill at ease.

Especially the dark-haired young man at the center of the scene. He stands on one side of the stage with six other soldiers, spaced at even intervals around...the old man. Whose back is covered by a flowing white cloak.

Music sounds, and those in the audience who haven't found a spot yet hurry to do so. The curtains open, and two stunningly large horses pull a god-like statue on a cart past the soldiers and onto the stage. Eleven more statues follow, and after a pause, a thirteenth arrives that looks like a younger version of the old man.

Then the old man himself strides into the spotlight, motioning to the soldiers that they should stay where they are. Alone, he walks slowly, proudly into the main theater, to a roar of approval...

As the young man tenses.

He pulls a dagger from its sheath with a bandaged hand. Switches the blade to his good hand. Uses the bandaged hand again to finger something around his neck—the bone bead, strung on a necklace—nods at another of the soldiers, and runs.

Past the other four soldiers.

Onto the stage.

And up behind the old man as the scene lurches forward.

The crowd's noise changes from adulation to alarm, and the old man begins to turn, his white cloak billowing around him in a slow arc. Just as the young man closes, something flashes on the old man's chest. The young man pauses for a split-second, as if taken aback...But only for that split-second. Still in motion, he drives the dagger into the old man's neck.

Chaos erupts as the young man continues past his falling, spouting victim and charges to the other side of the stage, the bead necklace banging against his chest with every stride. None of the audience members starting to climb onto the stage get within arm's reach, but heavy footfalls from behind indicate the pursuit is close and growing in numbers.

The young man dashes through the theater's private passages and out its rear entrance. Across the street, two horses are tied to a post with knots that look ready to give at the slightest provocation. The young man hurtles towards the closest mount, and—

Trips on a root.

He tumbles face-first and then scrambles to pull himself upright. But he's not fast enough to avoid the spear whose blade suddenly protrudes from his chest and clatters against his necklace. Gasping, the young man manages to turn himself over as the blood pouring from his wound begins to obscure the scene. His killer—the other soldier he'd nodded to—wrenches out the spear for a second blow, and then everything fades, first to red, then to black...

...Aliah pulled her hand from the bead in a daze, trembling with vicarious emotions. She'd never experienced anything so intense...But she still wasn't any wiser as to what it all meant. Who was the young man? Who was the old man he'd killed? And why—

Why was the splinter visible just below the surface of her right palm?

She stared at the fragment in horror before instinctively trying to brush it off with her other hand. The splinter remained where it was for another moment, though, before *swimming* away again, deep enough into her arm that she couldn't see it anymore.

Aliah did her best to get her breathing under control. At least she hadn't cried out this time; she was still alone. No one was coming to test the alibi now lying useless on the floor (where at some point, she'd dropped the database sheets). But if she hadn't known better—and come to think of it, she really didn't—Aliah would have said the splinter had been trying to reconnect with the bone bead, that the little sliver had migrated from her foot or wherever it had been hiding in her body to...say hello?

Did it miss its larger self?

And more importantly: what did it want from her?

* * *

Aliah spent the rest of lunch researching the bone bead as thoroughly as possible...while trying not to worry too much about the damage its splinter might be doing as it wandered through her veins and arteries.

She started with the database, thinking it made sense to work from the most modern records on down. Searching for the object number inked onto the bead's plain side brought up a discouragingly scanty file, however. It was as "bare-bones" as the records got, Aliah thought to herself with a weak smile. No picture, very little description, and a brief conservator's note that the bead was believed to be "Greek in origin; possible animal sacrifice remnant." There was also an uncertain sounding suggestion that the inscription translated to "Justice."

The old hardcopy ledgers weren't much more helpful. Apparently the bead had been acquired in 1894, and that year's ledgers—the museum's first—were as short on details as they were brittle. But they did at least narrow the bead's provenance to "possibly Macedonian."

The last source Aliah had time to consult before lunch ended and the department swung back into motion was the bead's lot file. This folder had paper copies of every document related to the batch of artifacts the bead had arrived with: donation letters, receipts, labels from past exhibits. Lots of general information, but nothing specifically useful...Although it was interesting to know that the bead had been inducted as one of the thousands of artifacts left over from the 1893 World Columbian Exposition.

Interesting, but not particularly meaningful.

As lunch ended, Aliah headed to Anthropology's main room feeling helpless. She'd learned a little, but not enough to have any idea what was really going on. And she had no clue where to look next. Maybe—

She stopped short when she realized what Mary and Brianna—the two Chattiest Cathies in the department—were carrying as they gabbed: a large World Eaters poster board with the title “History’s Greatest Whodunit: The Murder of Philip II, Alexander the Great’s Father.” Below this text was a scene vaguely like what she’d witnessed less than an hour ago.

No fucking way.

* * *

The other major discovery of the afternoon was that touching any object, “artifact” or not, could now set off a surge of unwanted memories. Things that hadn’t been around for very long—like pens or coffee mugs—usually didn’t have anything more than indistinct flickers to relate, but enough items wanted to communicate vivid, emotional remembrances that Aliah took to wearing fresh gloves at all times to stay sane. It seemed like she was getting more sensitive, as if viewing the extended assassination scene had opened the floodgates for whatever this...ability... was. At least her clothes hadn’t shared in any traumatic incidents, she thought wryly during one of her calmer moments. Because then she’d be fighting the urge to strip naked with every second.

And no one wanted to see that.

But feeling collected enough to be self-deprecating was the exception rather than the rule; most of Aliah’s remaining shift was one big panicky haze, as she tried to do enough work to get by without risking another invasive flashback.

Eventually, after what seemed like a three-day wait, the clocks read 4:30 and people started filing out. Aliah wasn’t the first to leave, but she was close to it. And she was the only one still wearing gloves, the blue disposable kind this time (with a box of back-ups in her bag). It would look weird on the train. But for once, she didn’t care what strangers might think of her. Her only objective right now was to get home...Get home and think.

It took her awhile to focus when she finally made it to her apartment, though. A sort of depressed inertia set in as soon as Aliah closed her door and shut out the world for the day. But after twenty minutes of trying not to touch anything in her *own home*, she forced herself to get in front of the computer and start learning everything she could about Philip II...Especially how he died.

Four hours later, after browsing what felt like hundreds of online articles and speculations, she had a basic story, a host of theories...and far more conflicting information and confusing names than she knew what to do with. To help get things straight in her head, Aliah did her best to summarize the essentials in her own words:

THE CONTEXT: With his victory at the battle of Chaeronea in 338 BCE, Philip II of Macedon cemented his kingdom’s hegemony over the rest of Greece securely enough that he could begin turning his eyes east towards Persia. Two years later, he set this next expansion in motion by sending his most trusted generals into Asia Minor with an advance force of 10,000 troops. But before he could follow with the rest of his army, Philip was assassinated by Pausanias of Orestis, a member of his own bodyguard. Alexander the III, Philip’s son by his third wife Olympias, seized the throne amidst the ensuing turmoil. After consolidating his Greek holdings, he picked up his father’s plans of conquest and pushed them further than Philip had ever dreamed: through not just Persia, but Egypt and India over the span of a legendary ten years. History would later acknowledge these exploits by

immortalizing him as “Alexander the Great.” The name may never have been earned, however, if his father hadn’t been killed when he was.

THE SCENE: The assassination took place in the theater of Aegae—the ancient capital of Macedonia—where Philip and Olympias’ daughter was in the process of being married. For the celebration, Philip summoned foreign representatives from many of his subject and allied territories: much of the festivities were designed to emphasize his ascendant power. The highlight of this display was a procession through the theater at sunrise of the second day. Statues of the twelve Olympian gods were paraded into the building, followed by a similarly fashioned statue of Philip, and finally by Philip himself. The king entered alone, having warned his bodyguard to stay well back so he could demonstrate his supreme confidence in the safety of his own dominion. As the old man approached center stage to acknowledge the cheering crowd, Pausanias rushed forward and killed Philip from behind. Chaos erupted as three other members of the king’s bodyguard chased after the assassin, who almost made it to his waiting horses before tripping and being run through as he tried to stand. By the time the traitor’s body was brought to the main hall, Alexander was king, and Philip’s reign was over.

THE THEORIES: The conspiracy theories that arose—

Aliah stopped typing for a moment, wondering if the various claims about who’d masterminded the killing were even worth delving into. The only thing the speculations had in common was that they suffered from the same basic lack of reliable evidence: none of the contemporary accounts still existed (aside from Aristotle’s brief reference in his larger work on politics). Which meant almost everything was drawn from Greek and Roman sources written centuries after the fact. So none of it was verifiable.

Except by her.

But from what Aliah had already glimpsed, some of the musings about Pausanias’s motives seemed true enough. And maybe more of them would bear out once she could make herself sit through another extended viewing or two... It was probably worth another page.

THE THEORIES: The conspiracy theories that arose, both at the time of Philip’s murder and in the centuries since, fall more or less into five categories:

- Personal revenge
- Family infighting
- Dynastic infighting
- Greek politics
- Persian politics

PERSONAL REVENGE: If nothing else, most theories agree on Pausanias’s motives for killing Philip: jilted love and a sense of injustice. The main question is whether others manipulated these motives for their own ends. But the basics are as accepted as anything gets with this subject:

Pausanias came to Philip’s court to be a royal page, a position bestowed on the sons of noble families the king wanted to keep in line (by taking what amounted to an honorary hostage). At some point after his arrival, Philip took Pausanias as a lover. It’s unclear how long this relationship lasted, but it seems to have gone on long enough for Pausanias to have been promoted to Philip’s personal bodyguard (the “somatophylakes”). Eventually, however, the king grew bored with the affair, and turned his affections to an even younger

soldier. Spurned, Pausanias publicly confronted the new favorite and called him a whore. The accused took this blow to his reputation extremely hard, and after hinting at his despair to his friend Attalus—one of the generals Philip would soon send into Persia—the boy effectively committed suicide by fighting without trying to defend himself in the king's next battle.

When news of the younger soldier's death reached the court, Attalus held Pausanias responsible. For vengeance's sake, he got the king's former lover drunk and then had him sexually assaulted. Once he'd recovered, Pausanias went to Philip seeking justice. But the old man was reluctant to move against Attalus, who was both a valued military leader and a relation by marriage. And the death of the king's younger lover was surely still a sore point. So instead of rebuking Attalus, Philip tried to placate Pausanias by giving him a higher position in the somatophylakes.

Pausanias seems to have taken the token gesture for what it was: twice spurned now, he redirected his enmity towards the king who kept rejecting him.

FAMILY INFIGHTING: The generally accepted story that Pausanias tried to run towards *two* horses, though, and the "fact" that his pursuers killed him rather than bringing him in alive for questioning, leaves open the possibility that he didn't act alone. Was he supposed to have had assistance from someone who thought better of committing regicide at the last second? Was that help one of the three other members of the bodyguard who killed him before he could implicate his accomplices and/or patrons? And why did a member of Philip's personal bodyguard, who attended on the king's person at all times, wait until a politically significant moment to make his move?

The easiest answer to these types of questions is that Alexander, Olympias, or both engineered Philip's assassination. Olympias' marriage to Philip had never been a love-match, and well before that fateful day in the Aegean theater relations had turned to out-and-out hate. Things got so bad, in fact, that Philip repudiated his marriage to Olympias and cast doubt on whether he considered Alexander a legitimate heir. So did an intra-family power play result? Proponents of this theory point to Alexander's messy purge of potential rivals in his pursuit of "justice" after the killing (which included the crucifixion of Pausanias's corpse) and Olympias' supposed glorification of Pausanias's body and memory.

DYNASTIC INFIGHTING: Other potential forces behind Philip's assassination include almost any number of Macedonian factions who disapproved of the direction the kingdom was headed, or simply wanted a shift in power. These possible instigators include Antipatros, Philip's chief advisor, who apparently resented the king's recent alliances with generals like Attalus. Attalus himself has also come under suspicion.

GREEK POLITICS: It's also been supposed that one or several of the Greek city-states Philip made a point of subjugating were involved: having been crushed militarily at Chaeronea, entities like Athens may have sought more covert means of regaining their autonomy.

PERSIAN POLITICS: Finally, some theories suggest that the Persian king, Darius III, arranged the assassination to disrupt Macedonia's invasion of his country. Persian agents may have approached Pausanias directly or worked indirectly through other disaffected Greeks.

But if this was the case, Persia's gambit only won it a brief respite. It took Alexander two years to stabilize the kingdom he so abruptly inherited, but once he had, he turned his eyes back east.

So which was it? Aliah let out a deep breath and pushed the keyboard tray under the desk, her (still gloved) fingers sore from typing so furiously. She wouldn't be able to figure out anything more without doing her own version of research...And before she messed with that again, she needed a break.

There wasn't much in the fridge to help her recharge, though: just some spoiled Mexican leftovers and a few stale bagels. Aliah settled for a glass of water. She'd never been that fired up about cooking. Or housekeeping, she thought ruefully as she navigated around miscellaneous piles of junk on her way to the couch. But she was making do. And not that badly, given how unexpectedly she'd left her parents' house six months ago...

Six months ago today, in fact, on February 15...As if on cue, Aliah's eyes settled on *the* bracelet: it was hanging from her ratty table lamp. Putting down the remote, she reached slowly for the dangling piece of jewelry and took it into her plastic-covered palms. The bracelet had been a sixteenth-birthday gift from her father, and she'd worn it religiously until...until that "fateful night."

What would it be like to relive her own history?

Aliah didn't give herself time to debate the pros and cons: in one quick motion, she pressed the bracelet to her forehead.

A variety of scenes from her teenage and college years came flooding back all at once, but with a burst of will, she controlled the sequence. Grimly, she focused on that night six months ago to see how her memories aligned with the reality...

...Her mother sits at the kitchen table, still clothed in the traditional jilbab she hasn't bothered to take off. Her father strides back and forth behind her mother, his belly swaying in time with his shaking head.

She sits slumped on the other side of the table, fiddling with the bracelet as she avoids their eyes.

"So this wasn't the first time?" her mother eventually asks in Arabic, her voice soft but cold.

She doesn't answer for several seconds, and then finally responds with a quiet "No."

Her father grunts and seizes what remains of his hair. "We didn't move here to...to—"

"To leave old constraints behind?" she interrupts, looking surprised at how forceful she suddenly sounds. "But I thought we did. I thought we left Iraq to start over...and..." She draws a deep breath and looks directly at both parents. "And things are different here. I'm sorry if it hurts you, but I'm not sorry I've done it...Or are you just surprised anyone would want me?"

Her mother winces at the accusing tone. "Aliah...We can't have this under our roof, no matter where that roof is."

"Then consider me no longer under your roof!" She pushes her chair back so hard that she stumbles as she stands. Turning jerkily, she runs upstairs without looking back, and the scene flees with her. When she reaches her bedroom door, she collapses against it, strips off the bracelet, and hurls it against the opposite wall...

...Aliah whipped her hand from the bracelet, shaking violently as she fell into the couch. That had definitely been a bad idea; it was way too soon. And the fact that the splinter had reappeared beneath the skin of her hand again wasn't at all comforting.

But it was intriguing, she realized as she tried to redirect her aching thoughts. Was the shard of bone...empathizing? Did something about her history resonate with—

And suddenly several of the bead's images she'd avoided disentangling until now started to make an awful sense. Swallowing dryly, Aliah plunged into her memories of them to be sure, cross-checking what various scholars and crackpots thought to be true as she went...

At some point after Pausanias's arrival, Philip took him as a lover.

...An older man kisses a younger in an opulent bed while sliding a ring onto his junior's finger. The younger man stares at the object for a long moment before embracing his elder with abject devotion...

For vengeance's sake, Attalus got the king's former lover drunk and had him sexually assaulted.

...The young man yells a drunken protest as several stable-hands hold him down for a gang rape. His right hand smashes into a chair leg as the first aggressor slams into him, jamming his ringed finger at an awkward angle...

...Alone, the young man wakes amidst the wreckage of his violation. Wincing, he gingerly touches his backside, his bloody brow...and his damaged finger. The section above the ring is visibly swollen and starting to turn a dark purple. Panicking, the young man tries to slide the ring off. But even after an immense, bruising effort, he fails: the flesh is too engorged with blood...

Once he'd recovered, Pausanias went to Philip seeking justice.

...The young man gestures animatedly in front of his elder, showing off all his wounds but making a point of highlighting his now extremely dark and distended finger. The old man hesitates before saying something that makes his junior gawk in disbelief...

Instead of rebuking Attalus, Philip tried to placate Pausanias by giving him a higher position in the somatophylakes.

...Alone and the picture of anguish, the young man stares at his blackened finger and reaches for his knife. With methodical, sawing strokes, he cuts it off below the ring...

...Showing several days' worth of new stubble, the young man picks up the decaying finger from where it lies on the floor. He slides the ring off the dead digit, and with an impassive face, begins removing the remaining skin and working out the marrow from the largest joint. Once that's done, he carves a word into the now hollow bone, threads a string through its newly cleared aperture, and ties the grim pendant around his neck...

Twice spurned now, Pausanias redirected his enmity towards the king who kept rejecting him.

...The young man bends down before a royal looking door and slaps the ring on the floor with his bandaged hand. The necklace hanging from his chest hovers above the bloodstained piece of gold as he lingers for a moment before standing and walking away...

...Aliah hugged her legs to her chest, trying not to throw up. The bone bead hadn't just belonged to Pausanias: it was part of him.

And now a piece of it—of him—was inside her.

* * *

Aliah spent the rest of the night in a daze, trying to numb herself by watching late-night TV and infomercials. It didn't work: she kept coming back to the realization that all the bead's memories before the...cutting...played from hand-height, while those that came after had a chest-level perspective. Was this artifact more animated because it had once been part of a person? Was that why it almost seemed to have a mind of its own? Why did...Why...

She couldn't remember what time she'd fallen asleep when she woke up the next day. Four... maybe five in the morning. But definitely late enough to have overslept her alarm by two hours.

Flying out the door, Aliah barely remembered to grab the box of latex gloves she'd started to depend on. When she finally arrived (unremarked) at work, she focused on churning through the next batch of artifacts. If she concentrated—and kept her hands covered—then everything was fine. It helped that the soon-to-be-obsolete storeroom from which she needed to fetch today's objects could only be reached by going through public space; navigating second-floor crowds with a packed cart was too nerve-wracking to allow time for thinking about much else.

Until 3:30, when Aliah's hand started *itching* as she rounded the Chinese exhibit.

She tried to ignore the sensation—at least until she was back in an employee-only area—but the itch accelerated from irritating to painful within a few seconds. Somehow, she managed to swallow most of her cry of shock; only a few people gave her funny looks. The pain kept increasing, though, and now something dark was starting to pool under the blue latex.

Panicking, Aliah tugged her cart into an alcove, ripped off her glove...And stared in horror.

A perfect circle was gouged into the back of her hand. Next to it was the splinter, visible again and wiggling furiously.

With a sharp grunt, Aliah tried to snatch the bone sliver with her good hand. But it was still too quick, darting away from her grasping fingers and scoring another bloody line in the process. Aching and defeated, she slumped against a nearby exhibit and grabbed her wrist instead. "What do you want?" she hissed in frustration, shaking her occupied arm as if doing so would fling away the splinter like water from a wet dog.

A flashback started to push against the mental barrier she'd begun erecting last night. Aliah felt this internal shield bend...but she kept it from breaking with another grunt. She couldn't stop the splinter from making another angry slash, however, angled so that her hand now sported an oozing X within a dripping O.

"What do you fucking want?" Aliah pleaded once more, feeling the resolve drain out of her as she let her arms fall limply to the floor...

...The young man fingers the bone bead around his neck, nods at another of the soldiers—who looks equally tense—and runs.

Past the other five soldiers, onto the stage, and up behind the old man as the scene lurches forward.

The crowd's noise changes from adulation to alarm, and the old man begins to turn, his white cloak billowing around him in a slow arc. Just as the young man closes with him, something flashes on the old man's chest. Something...golden. And round...

...The ring.

Aliah gasped as loud as she'd grunted moments earlier, her sight refocusing on the here and now of the bustling Field Museum. Philip had found the ring Pausanias slapped down in front of

his king's door... Found it and kept it. Around his neck, on a chain eerily similar to the one worn by his former lover. Pausanias had seen it as the old man turned... and still gone through with the assassination.

She took a deep breath and breathed another question, unsure if it needed to be voiced aloud, but unwilling to acknowledge a mental connection with the splinter if she could help it. "Am I... am I supposed to find the ring?"

The splinter wiggled once—in a gross parody of a nod—and then plunged back into her skin.

* * *

Over the next several days, Aliah used her spare time to scour the museum's holdings. It seemed logical to start with the World Eaters assemblage, but nothing in its catalogue said anything about "Philip's ring." And running her hands over the exhibit's jewelry pieces when she had a moment alone with them didn't turn up anything except more unwanted, unfamiliar memories.

Browsing the museum's larger holdings wasn't any more productive. The database didn't list any Philip-specific artifacts, and going through the large clusters of anonymous Greek rings was taking forever. To speed things up, Aliah had experimented with touching several at once, but the overlap of competing vignettes was too much.

After two weeks of this, she was close to breaking down. Her hand wasn't healing well—wearing gloves kept irritating the scabs—and she hadn't had a full night's sleep since before she learned who Pausanias was. At least the splinter had stayed quiet: her continued efforts to find its counterpart seemed to be enough to placate it for now.

But Aliah knew she was about to hit a wall. If she didn't find the ring in the museum soon... The next step was probably to go online and start searching other institution's catalogues. Which meant expanding the scope from one haystack to thousands. And what if the ring was tucked away in a private collection somewhere? Or circulating on a black market she had equally as little chance of tapping into?

Fittingly, it all came down to coincidence.

Three weeks after her life turned upside down, Aliah was temporarily reassigned to photograph a set of Turkish artifacts. It was a rush job for a visiting scholar, which apparently had to be done by this afternoon "come hell or high-water." (The fact that Terry had actually said this phrase kept it echoing in Aliah's head.) On automatic again, she was coasting through the new objects, taking advantage of the mandated break from World Eater items and all her related concerns.

But then her hand throbbed as she picked a golden goblet off its shelf.

Somehow, Aliah managed not to drop the delicate looking vessel. Her reward was another jab of pain, as the splinter pierced through skin and glove to tap against the cup's surface. A droplet of her blood oozed down the splinter's shaft, touched the goblet, and sparked a new set of images...

...Grubby grave robbers shout in triumph as their spades hit something solid. They waste little time in unearthing the body they've discovered, yelling again as they slide jewelry from its skeletal hands and decaying neck...

...The grave robbers throw up their hands to beg for mercy. But the road bandits have none of it; they butcher their quarry with the same dispassion they evidence afterward when they loot their corpses...

...The bandits hand over a bag of rings and pendants to a smiling merchant, who repays them in coin...

...A young noble buys one of the rings with an anticipatory smile...

...And offers it to a young, excited woman...

...The ring passes to another person...

...And another...

...Until a pragmatic-looking smith takes possession of the ring, melts it down with several other gold objects, and works hard and long to form the resulting liquid into a shining goblet...

...Aliah pulled herself out of the montage and set the goblet back on the cart. Then she exhaled forcefully.

The splinter had stayed on the goblet.

Feeling suddenly lighter, Aliah took a big step backward, trying to put enough distance between herself and the bone fragment that it couldn't jump the distance or do something equally insane. But the splinter just kept tapping against the base of the goblet with decreasing force...As if it were losing its essence now that it was no longer contained in her body?

Part of her wanted to let it...die, if that was the right word. Something about the splinter's relentless, diminishing efforts made her hurry to the elevator, however. Some part of her that wanted closure, even though she was already free of the impossible parasite.

Fortunately, no one was in the lab when Aliah emerged into the main Anthropology room. Which meant no one witnessed her pocket the rest of the bone bead—still unfixed; she'd overheard Terry grumbling about how resistant it was proving to repairs—and scurry back to the elevator.

The splinter was still moving when Aliah returned to the cart, but only barely: if she hadn't been looking for the motion, she never would have noticed it. Feeling a strange sense of urgency now, she withdrew the bead, rubbed her thumb lightly over the Greek inscription that might or might not read "Justice," and set the artifact gently on top of its missing fragment.

Faster than her eyes could follow, the two pieces merged into one...And started thudding against the goblet with renewed—and shockingly loud—force. The noise panicked her for a few moments before she had a sudden insight into *why* it was being made: if the bead had once been part of a finger, and the goblet was partially composed of a ring...

Breathing quickly, Aliah cast around for something with a point. The first such object to catch her eye was an ornate dagger lying on a nearby shelf.

Trying to ignore the fact that she'd be fired on the spot if anyone caught her at this, she scooped up the knife and started gouging out a hole near the goblet's upper edge, picking the cup up by its base to get enough leverage. The bead seemed to approve; looking creepily like an expectant dog, it raised itself up on one of its shorter sides to watch her work.

And it was definitely work: the knife wasn't an ideal tool. But the cup's gold was soft, and after no more than a minute of furtive scraping, Aliah succeeded in making a hole. A minute later, she'd hollowed this aperture to a size that looked large enough for its purpose.

Holding her breath now, she carefully upended the goblet to make her crude handiwork more accessible and set it on the cart.

The bead shook once—with excitement?—and glided into the opening. It lay there for a moment, motionless and serene...before turning to dust, along with several portions of the goblet that might have amounted to a ring's worth of metal.

* * *

That night, Aliah finally noticed what a pigsty her apartment had become. It never would have done Martha Stewart proud, but piles of notes and articles had sprung up everywhere, the detritus of her almost month-long search for answers.

Now she had one...along with some questions of her own to answer whenever someone noticed the pocked, corroded looking goblet and the missing bone bead.

What she didn't have, though, was the ability to sift through an object's history any longer. The skill seemed to have left her when the splinter ejected itself from her hand; nothing had happened when she touched the dagger...Or anything since.

Overall, Aliah mused as she flopped down on the couch—deciding that cleaning up could wait—it was probably for the best. Even if she'd learned to fully control the power, it was too disruptive, too unbalancing...But she had to admit that part of her would miss the historical insight.

Reaching absently for the remote, she noticed with detached amusement that it had been lying on a printout about Alexander's supposed role in his father's death. Aliah still wasn't sure about the particulars of the future conqueror's involvement; none of the scenes she'd delved into had shown the forging of a dark compact. Then again, Pausanias *had* nodded to that other guard, and there had been two horses...It seemed likely that more than just tainted love had been in play, but she no longer had the means to unravel any such conspiracy.

With a quiet sigh, Aliah shook her head, her eyes lingering on a sentence about Alexander's patricidal motivations. What a strange connection this had been. Alexander subjugated Persia shortly after the scene she'd relived so many times; Persia was her ancestral homeland...

And then something triggered her memories, her memories of *Pausanias's* memories. Which she could now control, adjust, and focus as she liked...

...The young man fingers the bone bead around his neck, nods at another of the soldiers—who looks equally tense—and runs.

Past the other five soldiers, onto the stage, and up behind the old man as the scene lurches forward. The crowd's noise changes from adulation to alarm...

...That must be Alexander on the other side of the stage; according to most accounts, he'd walked on with another potential heir before the procession of statues. Rewinding the scene, Aliah zeroed in on his portion of the background...

...From his closer vantage, the regal, dangerous looking youth seems to catch sight of the coming assassin before most of the crowd. His face tightens in shock as he realizes what's about to happen...but he doesn't shout a warning, opening his mouth only slightly before closing it, as if changing his mind. The knife falls, and the scene moves frantically forward...

...So. Aliah set down the remote to contemplate this revelation. It didn't look like Alexander had been in on the plot...But he didn't seem to have been opposed to its outcome.

She chewed this over for several minutes before another stray thought intruded: that morning she'd overheard one of her Muslim co-workers speculating that the new moon would be sighted in the evening, signaling the end of Ramadan. If that proved to be the case, then Eidu eul-Fitr, the festival breaking this year's month of day-time fasting (which, as usual, she hadn't observed) would be happening the next day.

After another moment's pause, Aliah reached for her backpack and rummaged through its outer pocket until she found her cell phone.

"Hi, Mom...Yeah, it's me...Do you mind if I come home for dinner tomorrow?"

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thanks for reading “Love and World Eaters.” If you liked it, would you mind leaving a [review](#)? Even just a few words would be awesome—it really helps.

Looking for something else to read? Check out *[The Red Wraith](#)*, my historical fantasy set in Early America. The protagonist is a Native American who becomes the focus for magic’s reentry into the world.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nick Wisseman lives in Bear Lake, Michigan with his wife, daughter, forty cats, and thirty horses. (Okay, so there are actually ten times less pets, but most days it feels like more.) He’s not quite sure why he loves writing twisted fiction, but there’s no stopping the weirdness once he’s in front of a computer. You can find the complete list of his oddities on his website: www.nickwisseman.com