

Prologue

Snow gathered around a small fountain in a secluded courtyard. It was dark, as evening was already well into its passing. The courtyard was made of old, weathered stone bricks well-worn with age and disuse. The snow piled up against the edges of the courtyard as well as against the fountain, unmarked and fresh. Two large buildings stood on either side of the small square blocking out most of the dying sunlight. A cold breeze stirred the snowflakes casting up shimmering waves of white and blue. The trees behind and all around the courtyard had their branches stripped bare and seemed to shiver when the breeze flowed through them.

The fountain itself seemed very lonely, here in the dying light of the evening. The sunlight could not even reach it, for the large buildings in front of it. It was made of old gray stone beautifully carved to resemble an outward splash of water. In the center of the fountain was a pillar engraved with stone ivy, bubbling coming from the tip. And on one of the edges of the fountain there sat a girl. She was stock still, perched with her legs draping over the outward side of the fountain. One hand was stretched back, balancing her against the rim, while her other hand was raised to her face as if to brush away a hair. Her head was facing down, and white hair like marble flowed on either side of a beautiful face. She was young, an indeterminate age really, but she was the vision of perfection. Many had called her beautiful, or remarked on the wonder of her shape and form. In fact, she was the basis for every concept of beauty that had been expressed for the past two thousand years.

Sobbing echoed from behind the buildings, pent-up and only barely restrained.

The statue's skin was a blank gray stone, and her face as well. Her marble hair was in fact marble, and her eyes as well, with irises made of sparkling clear-blue diamonds. Her face, her

hands, her legs, and even her dark gray dress had all been shaped with immaculate care by whatever artisan had created her. Her pose, that of a carefree girl perched precariously on the edge of a fountain, was a wonder.

“Aysa, you can’t just hide in there!” a voice called out, “You have to talk to something besides that big pile of rocks!” At the mouth of the courtyard, a figure skidded to a stop, panting in the deepening evening.

Generations of stonemasons and sculptors had examined the statue, trying to discover how it was that her creator could have left her in such an unstable position. And yet she had not broken, nor even chipped, in all the time she had rested here on her fountain. The crinkles of the dress, the tiny anatomical details of the hands and appendages, the simple, soft beauty of her face... all were marvels that not even current generations could understand.

A flurry of motion disturbed the snow before the fountain, as a girl bundled up in a warm coat and mittens fell to the ground at the statue’s feet. She was shivering, with both cold and sorrow. She mouthed something – “go away” – and shook her head, balling her hands up in fists.

The students of the College called the statue “Cybele,” after an old, mythological goddess of beauty. She was the most famous sculpture ever crafted, the basis upon which all other expressions of beauty rested, and one of the largest enigmas still residing in the world. Of her creator, people knew nothing at all. Her origin, her crafting, the skills and techniques used to imbue her with such beauty and poise... all had been lost. But she remained, solid, immobile, and absolute. She simply was, had always been, and always would be.

“I’m... I’m sorry,” the girl on the ground whispered, looking up. She had blonde hair, a darker sort of golden brown that only shone golden when the few dying beams of light managed to find it. Her eyes were hazel, and her face one of sharper lines and harsher edges.

Her face was broken now, with the trails of tears down her cheeks. She gazed up at the statue like she wanted a miracle. What, even she didn't seem to know. She had stumbled into the courtyard alone, sobbing and drawing in ragged breaths of cold air. She shivered, still crying as the sun sank fully beneath the world. She cried, her mouth sometimes forming vague impressions of words.

"I... I thought he..." she whispered, before putting her head back down and sobbing again. The statue listened as it had to thousands like her. The stone girl was immobile, still carefree on the edge of the fountain, as she always had been, and always would be.

Chapter I

Time passed. The snow intensified, building up on the statue's upper surfaces. The fountain ceased bubbling, then began again when the sun started shining brighter. The snows melted, and life returned, blooming with renewed vigor. Vines crept over the statue's bare feet, wrapping around her legs and sporting small green leaves. Then the sun beat down on the world, and the statue soaked in the rays with her same and singular carefree nature.

Slowly the clouds returned to the sky. The days grew colder and the wind blew with a chill characteristic of autumn. The courtyard, small and still hidden behind two larger buildings, seemed to flood with fallen leaves. Orange and gold and red, the discarded remnants of the trees shifted in large waves, like a sea of autumnal color. Red, brown, and golden shades flitted about, like a swirling storm of color. In the center, the small fountain stretched up above the leaves. Remarkably, it still ran with clear water, though leaves piled here too. The trees above the courtyard had long, reaching branches, draping over the space like a dome of wood, and so dropped leaves to float like little boats in the water.

At some point, eyes watched the courtyard from the side, in the vines and leaves around the space. Late in the evening, a girl walked into the courtyard. She had been here before, crying

into the uncaring snow at the feet of the carefree statue. Her hair was still brown, sparkling with hints of gold in the evening sun. She wore a light jacket, and simple pants, and she kicked her way through the leaves with her hands in her pockets. She was looking down and watching the colors scatter with her every step. It was getting late but she didn't seem to care. The girl then looked up at the fountain and gasped, tripping back and falling to the ground.

“No!” she called out, blinking away sudden tears from her hazel eyes. She stared at the fountain in horror, shaking. The eyes watching the courtyard cocked sideways in curiosity, creeping closer. The girl shook her head, whispering to herself. “No, no...” she said, “where...” The eyes in the leaves blinked, something scraping against the ground. The girl's head whipped around, confused, but she saw nothing in her haste.

In the leaves waited another girl, much stranger than her. The girl's dress was dark gray and seemed to have a rough texture, despite the way it flowed like real cloth with her every movement. Her hair fell in waves around her face, a beautiful and clean white. It seemed to flow in shapes, forming together for a moment before splitting, to replicate how hair shifted in the wind. Her face, made of impassive gray stone, seemed to somehow move, turning her mouth down in a frown. Her eyes, each a sparkling blue diamond, blinked as she slowly reached a hand out towards the other girl who still lay crying on the ground. The stone girl's hand touched the other's shoulder, and the other screamed, scuttling forward and whipping her head around. The stone girl looked up at her, blinking confusedly, and the other girl screamed again.

“I... you, you can't...” she said, struggling, “you can't be... you're... you're just a... just...” She pressed a hand to her chest, as the stone girl frowned slightly, moving back. She slowly stood up, feeling the stiffness in her joints fade away as she moved. The other girl stared at her in disbelief, shaking her head. “You...” she said, “you can't... you aren't... Cybele?”

The stone girl blinked, then shrugged, seeming to both nod and not. She still kept back, though, looking at the other girl questioningly. The autumn wind whipped up a small spinning wave of leaves, making the girl by the fountain shiver in the cold. The stone girl, Cybele, cocked her head in confusion, then moved forward slightly, looking at the other expectantly.

“I... I'm Aysa,” the other girl said, “I... how are...?” Then, the two girls both looked back to the entrance of the courtyard, where quickened footsteps sounded from the pavement outside. Cybele looked back to the other girl, Aysa, blinking and seeming lost. Then a man in a long coat rounded the corner, before flinching back in surprise. Cybele turned to look at him, tilting her head to the side.

She was, and she had always been. But she would not be so, and that... confused her. Cybele blinked, frowning slightly as the wind whipped around her again, leaving her dress hanging heavily at her sides, chill unable to penetrate beneath her stone skin.

Cybele sat in the chair a tad uncomfortably, awkwardly shifting around. She was in a strange room, one she had never seen before. It was bright, lit from above by an odd strip of light. There was a window which had strips of something drawn thick over it. She sat next to another girl, Aysa, who seemed unable to stop staring at her. Cybele... remembered, an odd feeling for her, that the men who had found her had looked at her the same. They had politely given her a thick coat to wear, though she had not been cold. Then they had led them both here, to this room with its bright light and strange devices.

Another person sat at the desk in front of her and the other girl, Aysa. He was an older man, as much as Cybele understood age, and he had a dark beard and a wide face. His eyes were covered by two discs of shining light like glass, but on the bridge of his nose. He stared at her in

disbelief too, hands resting on a fine wooden desk. Cybele, feeling the tension in the room, began swinging her legs back and forth. She did not know where the motion came from, but it felt like it fit.

“I... I do not know quite what...” the man said, “I do not quite know what to say. Miss Aysa... you say you simply found her like this?” The other girl looked quickly over to the man, nodding before bowing her head. She looked afraid and Cybele wondered if her fear was directed towards her.

“She... she snuck up on me,” Aysa said, “I saw... saw that the...” Her eyes darted to the side and Cybele cocked her head in confusion. She was doing that a lot, she felt. Many things were confusing though she couldn't quite understand why. “... the statue,” Aysa continued, “it... she... was gone. I panicked a bit, wondering...” The man behind the desk nodded.

“Yes, yes,” he said, “I'd expect so... she has sat on that fountain for... well, for longer than the College has existed.” He sighed, turning to face her. Cybele quickly stilled her legs, looking up at him and paying attention. He blinked in surprise, then coughed. “Well, then,” he said, “perhaps Miss... Cybele, can say something? If she can indeed speak-”

“Μπορώ να μιλήσω μόνο αν μου πείτε σε ποια γλώσσα είναι μοιραζόμαστε,” Cybele said, and the man and the girl both flinched backwards. She frowned. “Τι?” she said, “Δεν το ξέρεις?”

“It's... it's Old Irrelic, I think,” Aysa said, “I... she is speaking too... too quickly, I can't...”

“តើធ្វើដូចម្តេចអំពី រឿងនេះ?” Cybele said, “ខ្ញុំមិនអាច ទាយបាន មួយដែល បានដោយគ្រាន់តែ បានស្តាប់ អ្នកបានដឹង។” The two both shook their heads, and Cybele rolled her eyes. “How about this, then?” she asked, and the two nodded quickly. Her voice flowed out much smoother than one would expect from stone, gentle and pleasant to hear.

“Perfect, yes,” the man said, “I... I must admit, I am somewhat... unfamiliar, with how to address a statue.” Cybele tilted her head.

“Just like anyone else?” she asked, “I am not a statue anymore.” The girl, Aysa, gaped at her, obviously shocked.

“Well... why?” the man asked. She shrugged, not particularly caring. He blinked, then coughed. “Alright then,” he said, “I... I suppose I should introduce myself.”

“Such fits with most forms of politeness, yes,” Cybele said, blinking. The man frowned, then shook his head.

“Yes indeed,” he said, “I am Headmaster Daniel, and I'm in charge of the College.”

“The what?” Cybele asked, “I was not aware of it.”

“How... how are you...” Aysa said, “how are you *aware*?” Cybele turned to her, face blank of emotion. The girl shied back, and Cybele quickly tried to smile. It appeared to be effective, mostly.

“The College is where you are, Cybele,” the headmaster said, “it's where you've been for the past... hundred and fifty years, or so. And, I know you say you do not know...”

“I am awake,” Cybele said, “do you not believe yourself to be?” The headmaster stared at her, blinking and seeming to ever so slightly nod, before he shook his head and coughed. Cybele began swinging her legs again, as the feeling was somewhat pleasant. It also nicely served to calm the others, somehow.

“I... yes, indeed,” the headmaster said, after a lengthy pause. Then, he turned to face Aysa, grimacing. “Miss Aysa,” he said, “I... I know this may be much to ask of you, but you are here with the early move-ins, correct?” Aysa nodded. “And no one else has been assigned to

your room?” the headmaster asked. Aysa's eyes went wide, and Cybele turned to face the man again.

“I will not intrude on her living quarters without her consent,” she said, “my fountain will serve adequately. I do not see what the problem is.” The headmaster bit his lip, but Aysa hesitantly laid a hand on Cybele's shoulder.

“I'm fine with it,” she said, “really, it's fine. I... yes, it's just fine.” Cybele tilted her head, then used her smile again. Aysa smiled back, and Cybele nodded before turning back to the headmaster.

“Very well,” she said, “I suppose you wish to keep me... hidden?”

“A walking statue might cause some minor commotion, yes,” the Headmaster said, “I mean no disrespect, of course. And, furthermore, you... you are rather the celebrity.” Cybele shrugged, then stood up, nodding to the man.

“I am just a girl,” she said, before looking down to Aysa, “are you ready?” The girl stared up at her for a moment, before standing. The two left the office, with the headmaster quickly handing Cybele the coat, to conceal her. She donned it as best she could manage, then followed Aysa out into the autumnal night.

Cybele followed the other girl, Aysa, as she led them through the College. She was only mildly annoyed by the thick coat she was forced to wear, to hide her identity. The pair passed a few other people Aysa's age, who looked her way strangely. Cybele didn't bother trying to hide herself any more than the coat already did. People would find out eventually in any case. Plus, it was dark out, though the sun had set only a little while ago, and so the sky remained a sort of kaleidoscope of deep blues, purples, and blackness. A few stars picked themselves out against the endless backdrop, twinkling in the heavens. Strange lights lined their path, shining from

within small glass bulbs and making the sidewalk into a series of illuminated circles separated by shadows. They passed by her fountain which Cybele spared a short glance for. The leaves still cluttered around the courtyard and she could see where the vines creeping up the side of the fountain had been curled around her leg. She couldn't actually remember when she had woken up, but she didn't particularly care either.

They came to a tall building with many windows and a pair of glass doors at the bottom. It seemed newer than some of the other buildings. It had a stone edifice much the same color as she was. It had short steps leading up to the doors which Aysa almost tripped on. Cybele reached out to catch her, if need be. Aysa took out a key to let them in with and then led Cybele towards the stairs. She began to climb them, but stopped when Aysa reached out and grabbed her hand. Cybele looked around, tilting her head in confusion as the girl stepped back, nodding to the wall. Cybele came back down and looked at it finding a pair of seemingly metal doors with a label reading "Elevator: Max Weight 907 kg." Cybele looked down at herself, then shrugged.

"I would prefer the stairs," she said simply, before turning and walking towards them. Aysa hurried to catch up and Cybele frowned. "I could simply meet you there," she said.

"You don't know what floor it's on," Aysa replied. They went up four flights of stairs, by which time Aysa was breathing heavily, looking a bit red in the face. Cybele felt fine, but she didn't think she was capable of exhaustion. Or breathing. However, she still stopped at the top, to give her companion a rest.

The floor consisted of a long hallway, with numerous doors to either side. Just a little ways down the hall was the elevator door and Cybele wondered how anyone was supposed to know the elevator was behind it. Though, she reflected, she also couldn't see how to actually open the doors in the first place. Aysa recovered, taking a deep breath before striding down the

hall. Cybele followed until they stopped by a door at the end. Aysa took out a key and opened the door, holding it open for her. Cybele nodded, then went inside. It was a medium sized room with three long windows to the side. Two beds sat on either end of the room, and two writing desks sat side-by-side in the middle.

"Well, what do you think?" Aysa asked, and Cybele nodded again.

"It is nice," she said, walking in and taking off the coat. She laid it down carefully on the unused bed, away from the windows. She turned around, blinking.

"Uh... well," Aysa said, walking in and shutting the door, "the bathrooms are just down the hall-"

"I do not believe I will need them," Cybele said. She looked back to the bed, her bed she supposed, and sat down. Aysa looked slightly uncomfortable, so Cybele started swinging her legs again. She guessed it affected an air of inattention that put others at ease. Hopefully. Aysa then moved over to her own bed, taking off her coat and lying it there. She wore a shirt and pants underneath, as well as laced-up shoes. She stared at Cybele for a moment before coughing.

"So, then..." she said, still obviously uncomfortable. Cybele frowned.

"If you do not wish for me to be here, I can return to my fountain," she said, "it does not bother me." Aysa blinked, then raised her hands and shook her head.

"No, no," she said, "I... it is just a bit strange, to be here, talking with you. I mean..."

"I am a statue," Cybele said, nodding.

"Well... yes, I suppose," Aysa said, grimacing, "I... I don't want to be rude, but... do you actually know why you're like this?" Cybele frowned, tapping a stone finger on the sheets. She couldn't quite remember, so she shrugged.

"I simply am," she said, "I have always been a statue, and now I am not. There is no reason for the existence of stone." Aysa nodded slowly, then bit her lip. "You may continue asking questions," Cybele said, "I will try to answer them."

"What language was that?" Aysa asked, "The second one, not Old Irrelic. I've never heard it before."

"Unfortunately, I do not know its name," Cybele said, "it calls itself something, of course, but I am unsure of my translation." She paused. "You will find that I do not know much," she said, "I cannot remember anything prior to meeting you. The languages simply... wait. They are ready to be used, if I should choose so."

"I expect the linguistics professors would want to talk to you," Aysa said with a small smile. Cybele quickly smiled back, then stopped when the girl nodded. Aysa frowned, and Cybele quickly began swinging her legs again. "Why... why do you keep doing that?" Aysa asked.

"It puts you at ease," Cybele said, "just like smiling, or other such things." Aysa cocked her head, and Cybele stopped swinging her legs. "I have no need for them, of course," she said, "I do not smile, or laugh, or get distracted enough that my legs start moving on their own. But somehow I know that showing that would make others uncomfortable. So I pretend."

"That seems very annoying," Aysa said, and Cybele shrugged again. It was quickly becoming one of her most used expressions. If she was not made of stone, she suspected she might seriously injure her shoulders.

"I do not get annoyed," she said, "perhaps slightly so, but not in any serious fashion. It is the perk of being stone, I suppose." Aysa laughed slightly, and so Cybele quickly did as well. Her own laugh was light and chiming, very pleasing to the ear.

"So... is there anything you want to ask?" Aysa asked, smiling at her. Cybele paused for only a moment before answering.

"Why am I celebrity?" Cybele said, "The headmaster said as much, and I do not understand. I am just a girl, and I was once just a statue, why would I be famous?" Aysa blinked, then stood up and went over to her desk, searching through a few books there. She finally found one and gave it to Cybele. And it had her face on it, a full-color, lifelike reproduction in stunning detail. Cybele felt a slight bit of surprise, but it faded within seconds.

"You... you're one of the marvels of the world," Aysa said slowly, taking a step back, "the idea of beauty has been based off of your face and... body, for hundreds of years." Cybele opened the book, flipping through the pages.

She found the one that spoke of her soon enough, covering the "Cybelline Era" of art. Her creator, though unknown, had established a new model of perfection and skill with his creation of, well, her. Cybele blinked, then continued reading. It spoke of how her face had the perfect, most realistic proportions of any sculpture of the age, and how even modern scholars and sculptors couldn't comprehend how her creator had achieved such a liveliness to her body. She didn't know whether that would be considered funny, now that she was alive and reading it.

"Must be surprising, finding out that you're... well, that," Aysa said, "it'd creep me out." Cybele shrugged, closing the book and handing it back to her.

"I am a bit annoyed that they named me," she said, "without even asking me. Or my creator, at least." Aysa frowned.

"Would you like to be called something else?" she asked. Cybele paused, thinking, then shook her head.

"It is sufficient," she said, "merely curious, I suppose."

"Cybele was the name of an old goddess," Aysa said, "one of beauty, back in the old mythology. I... learned about her, and the others, last... last year." Cybele nodded, only slightly confused as to why they would name her after a god. "Do you... are you sure you don't remember anything, from... before?" Aysa asked quietly. Cybele shook her head.

"I remember nothing," she said, "my first memory is leaves, and watching you walk into the courtyard. Why were you there?"

"I, uh..." Aysa said, slowly and beginning to blush. Cybele frowned.

"You need not answer if you do not wish to," she said, but Aysa shook her head.

"I was just... visiting," she said, "I always loved that courtyard, last year. It's so secluded and quiet, and, well... oh, I cannot really say it now..."

"You liked me?" Cybele asked. Aysa's eyes went wide, and Cybele blinked. "My statue, I suppose," she said quickly, "are you a sculptor?"

"Oh, no," Aysa said quickly, "I'm just... no, I'm not. I simply thought you were beautiful, and the courtyard was nice."

"I am sorry I frightened you," Cybele said. Aysa took the book back to her desk, shrugging. She went from there to a dresser, which she opened.

"It's fine," she said, turning, "also, would you like to borrow some night clothes?" Cybele tilted her head, then shook it.

"I don't believe I can change," she said, looking down at her dress. It hung on her in an incredibly realistic manner, and was heavy, but not overly so compared to the heaviness of her entire body. She also didn't understand why she would need different clothes at night, as she never had before, but she didn't mention it. Aysa shrugged and then took out some clothes for herself, before glancing back at Cybele.

"I... I'm going to go ahead and change, then," she said. Cybele blinked at her, and Aysa continued to stare.

"Oh, oh," Cybele said suddenly, "you are uncomfortable. I can leave the room-"

"No, just... turn around, it's fine," Aysa said. Cybele nodded, and turned to face the wall. She heard Aysa getting dressed behind her, and so she examined the wall in the meanwhile. It looked like some sort of rock, very smooth and colored a slight cream. She frowned, then raised a hand and put her finger on the stone. It pushed straight through, poking a small hole in the wall. Cybele blinked, then frowned and looked back to Aysa, who was half-way through pulling on an over-sized shirt.

"Oops," Cybele said, and Aysa sighed before laughing, shaking her head.

The night passed with no more incident, though Aysa did seem to worry when Cybele did not sleep. She couldn't help it, really. She didn't feel tired, or sleepy, or anything else for that matter. Her companion seemed to feel slightly guilty that Cybele would be forced to stay up with no one to talk to but she didn't mind; she had time to look at the stars out the window, or examine the room. She wanted, briefly, to look through the desk and drawers as well, just out of general curiosity. But after Aysa's awkwardness with changing clothes Cybele guessed that she might have been somewhat upset.

Once the sun had risen, Aysa got up looking very lost and confused. Her hair was a wild mess around her head and her eyes ringed with red. She glanced over at Cybele, then rolled her eyes. Cybele didn't bother asking. She watched as Aysa gathered up a few things then left silently. She was gone for almost half an hour and Cybele had begun to get slightly concerned

when the girl returned. Her hair was slicked down and wet, and she was dripping with water, wearing a thick cloth around her.

"It's a shower," Aysa said, responding to Cybele's confused look, "for keeping clean. You should give it a try, it's really pleasant." Cybele shrugged, then let the girl guide her to the bathrooms. They were very clean, with tile on the floor and small enclosed spaces with metal fixtures on the wall. Cybele got in one, closing the curtain at Aysa's pressing, before she reached up to turn on the shower. It began spraying water on her from above, which ran in streams down her hair, face, and body. She stared up into the spray for a few minutes, before turning the shower off and stepping out.

"Well?" Aysa asked, smiling. Cybele looked down at her body, which had darkened from the water and now seemed to have several dimly sparkling bits in different places. She shrugged.

"I am wet now," she said, "was that the purpose?" Aysa sighed, turning away and taking them back to the room. Cybele looked back and saw how she left wet imprints of her feet behind her as she walked. She dried slowly, and resolved to not try showering again, unless for some reason she needed to. Aysa got dressed, with Cybele turning to face the wall again, and then she sat down on the bed. Moments later, Aysa's stomach made a low rumbling noise.

"Are you hungry?" she asked. Cybele raised an eyebrow, something she had seen Aysa do before.

"I do not eat," she said, "but we can go get food for you, if you wish." Aysa looked a bit conflicted, so Cybele smiled. "I will wear the coat," she said, "there are not many people here yet, correct?" Aysa nodded, then stood. Cybele pulled the coat on, adjusting it around her dress. It was somewhat difficult, and seemed a waste of effort. Aysa looked at her critically, frowning.

"You probably need some pants," she said, "your legs are too gray. And a hat. And maybe a scarf."

"Perhaps I should simply wait here," Cybele said, but Aysa shook her head, moving to the dresser and taking out some clothing. Cybele put it all on, and Aysa nodded before leading them out. Cybele felt that if she was human, she would probably be quite uncomfortable. As it was, she was just trying not to rip anything. She had a thick coat on with baggy pants underneath, a hat, and a purple scarf. All that was visible were her eyes, which were quite unusual just by themselves.