Lilith Moscon

Xenia Against Time

1. Alma

I called her Alma.

When we first met, her fur was as dirty as a pair of shorts after a soccer match.

She stood tall on the hood of a car.

From a distance, she looked like a ship's lantern, perhaps because she was white, and the night was dark.

I approached, convinced she would run away. Instead, she let me get just a few inches from her face—close enough to notice that she was nearly, or completely, blind in one eye.

The lid of her sightless eye drooped down.

"Xenia, don't touch her," I told myself, remembering the day I had picked up a cat on Via de' Benci. That fateful day, I had seen a tabby strutting along the sidewalk, indifferent to traffic and passersby.

Seeing a cat on a street lined with pubs and shop windows is like spotting a fox in a chocolate store, a bear on an escalator in a shopping mall, an elephant on a traffic island.

I thought I absolutely had to save that poor creature from the dangers of the city.

But the poor creature showed no sign of fear.

It moved slowly, confidently.

Still, I lifted it from the ground and started walking home.

I was proud of myself, I had done the right thing.

After only a few steps, I heard someone yelling behind me: "Thief! Cat thief!"

A woman with platinum blonde hair was glaring at me, ready to kill me if I didn't return the animal immediately. She was the owner of a shop called Il Giardino di Carla, which, despite its name, did not sell rare flowers but fruits and vegetables.

"Cat thief!" she repeated.

Without meaning to, I had stolen her whiskered shop assistant.

I apologized and watched, disheartened, as the cat returned to the store with the platinum-haired woman.

With Alma, things went differently. There was no need to pick her up. She was the one who followed me. She leapt down from the car hood and trailed behind me. Every now and then, I turned to check if she was still there, and she was. I stopped, and she stopped. I turned a corner, and she did too.

When I realized I was actually bringing her home, I started sweating, as if someone had lit a bonfire on my sternum—that flat, elongated bone like a valley nestled between hills.

Once we arrived, she explored the kitchen, the bathroom, and the bedrooms.

She didn't rub against anything to mark it with her scent. The space already belonged to her.

Now came the hardest part: convincing my parents to keep her.

They would list a series of objections:

- "She'll shed fur everywhere."
- "We don't have a garden."
- "Who will feed her?"
- "Who will take care of her when we're away?"

I prepared my answers, one by one. I would tell them about the first domesticated cats, the hunters of mice in early human settlements, and the feline companions in today's homes. I would mention Garfield, the comic strip cat, Sylvester the cat, Puss in Boots.

I would make them want Alma with us.

Once my strategy was in place, I waited for them to come home.

I picked out an old sweater to make her a bed and filled a bowl with water.

Meanwhile, she watched me with her one good eye.

Finally, the door opened. They were home. They took off their jackets and shoes in the entryway. They spotted the cat. They froze, with the same expression as someone discovering a spider in the bathtub or a pimple in the middle of their forehead.

Then, unexpectedly, they softened. They walked toward her, began stroking her, cleaning her with a cloth.

Goodbye, Garfield. Goodbye, Sylvester. Goodbye, Puss in Boots.

Alma could stay.

The new tenant had a habit of going up to the rooftops in the morning when I opened my bedroom window. With a leap, she landed on that world of chimneys, air conditioners, and satellite dishes.

She sniffed the air.

She observed the leaves gathered in the gutters.

She hunted anything that crossed her path: lizards, geckos, swifts.

At least, that's what I imagined.

No one really knows what cats do on rooftops.

Inside the house, her prey were sandflies, flies, and butterflies.

She took down the first ones easily; they had slow reflexes.

Flies were trickier—she swiped at them, but they survived, regained strength, and buzzed away, sizzling like eggs on a pan.

Butterflies were the perfect in-between: more reactive than sandflies, less cunning than flies.

She played with them, pawed at them, and watched them die slowly.

When butterflies emerge from their chrysalis, their wings are still wet, and it takes them a few hours before they can fly. They take off at dawn, while their predators sleep.
Alma, however, left the house in broad daylight, without me noticing.
She found the door open—and ran away.

2. Nap Time

I had run away once too.
June of last year.
I planned an escape with Cinotti, Masiero, and Dainelli—my classmates.
When we plotted clandestine activities, we called each other by our last names.
It made us serious, meticulous. We sent coded messages to avoid getting caught.
There were only a few days left until the end of school.
From our classroom, we could hear pigeons cooing and Michele, the janitor, talking to himself in his booth on the top floor of the building.
“What a bother we are, huh?” he said.
“None at all.”
Michele had a wooden leg and limped down the hallways.
He had once found a Scottish Shepherd and her puppies abandoned by the roadside and had brought them to school.
Everyone went up to the top floor to chat with Michele and see Lola—that was the name we had given to the school’s first official dog.
The shepherd’s fur was as smooth as Giada Masiero’s hair after using a flat iron.
Every morning, Giada waged war against curls and cowlicks, wielding her flat iron to tame her frizzy mane. Sometimes, she smelled of burnt hair and had strands sticking up. That happened when the iron was old, ready to be trashed, or when she had used it carelessly.
How the principal had allowed Michele to keep a dog and her puppies at school remains a mystery.
“What a bother we are, huh? None at all,” the janitor muttered, knowing that his little tail-wagging family would be evicted at the first sign of trouble.
The principal was a kind and quiet man.
He would have benefited from stopping by Masiero’s house in the morning—he had a tuft of hair sticking straight up at the back of his head. Because of this peculiar trait, some bold spirit had written a message in large, black capital letters on his locker: Saverio, comb your hair.
Saverio, the principal, either took it in stride or never noticed. The fact was, the writing remained for months, years. Anyone who stepped into his office would inevitably read: Saverio, comb your hair.

His right-hand woman, the vice principal, was a radiant woman whose name suited her personality: Fiammetta.
Saverio walked up and down with his arms crossed and his gaze drifting upward.
His presence at school was nearly useless.
The real leader was Fiammetta.
She handled everything.
Fiammetta arrived at school with one eye made up and the other bare.
Her right eye was heavy with blue eyeshadow, mascara, and eyeliner.
Her left eye was bare.
Did she always forget the left one? Did she like it that way?
No one had ever dared to ask her about the asymmetry that made her look like a cyclops on one side and a mouse on the other.
After all, she cared about us. She felt genuinely sorry when we got bad grades in her subject, art history.
So much so that she did everything she could to prevent it.
“Who painted this?” she would ask, covering the artist’s name on the slide.
“I don’t know.”
“Yes, you do.”
“No, prof, I don’t.”
“I’ll help you: Gio…”
“…”
“Giott…”
“Giotto!”
“See? You knew it!” she’d say, satisfied.
There was no way we’d embarrass her.
She could do her makeup however she pleased.
When she taught, she darkened the classroom to project images onto a wall. Then she would illustrate them, gesturing in the darkness.
She wore bracelets up to her elbows, which jingled with every movement.
The absence of light and the sound of her bracelets had a hypnotic effect.
As she explained, her voice gradually became a mantra, and one by one, we succumbed to sleep, resting our heads on our classmates' shoulders.
Lorenzo Cinotti, lanky as he was, couldn’t reach anyone’s shoulder and risked losing his balance and falling off his chair.
Needless to say, art history class was called “nap time.”
“There’s nap time now,” “What grade did you get in nap time?” “Good thing we have an hour

of nap time," "Are you caught up in nap time?"
That's how we talked about the poor vice principal's subject.

(…)

5. Five Hours

"Leone, I need to tell you something."
"Hey Xenia, tell me."
"Alma has run away."
"Are you absolutely sure?"
"Yes."
I called Leone because he was my best friend. The only one who waited for me at the school gate before class, hoodie pulled up, hands in his pockets. The only one I could sit in silence with or talk about music, books, socks after gym class, and the drowsiness caused by the sound of a hairdryer.
When I first started calling him, I always heard a croaky voice behind him: "LEONEEE."
It was a shrill voice, impossible to place in age.
It could have belonged to an old lady in flesh-colored stockings, a wide plaid skirt, and a woolen cap pulled down over her ears. I imagined her with sunken eyes and prominent cheekbones covered in a web of tiny veins.
But it could just as easily have been the voice of a scrawny boy with a pointy nose and rabbit teeth.
Both of them, old lady and boy, scared me.
Because of that voice screeching "LEONEEE," I always refused invitations to my friend's house.
I made up excuses, invented last-minute plans.
One day, though, I gathered my courage. I went over.
He had discovered a new band and wanted me to hear them. Then we would bake a dozen cupcakes together.
I rang the doorbell. Stepped inside.
In the dining room, inside a cage as big as my bed, perched an Indian myna bird. Its feathers were black and glossy, as if slicked with pomade.
Two fleshy yellow growths adorned its head on either side. It looked as if it had dressed up for me, for its guest.
"LEONEEE!" it shrieked.
I dropped the bags in my hands. Colored sprinkles, chocolate chips, and berries spilled onto the floor—everything I had bought to decorate the cupcakes.

The Indian myna was the old lady, it was the scrawny boy: the mystery that had kept me away from my schoolmate’s house was finally solved.
That afternoon, I called Leone to ask him to help me find Alma.
After years of domestic life, she had gone back to being a stray cat.
I couldn’t believe it.
It was exactly three o’clock, and my parents would be home at eight.
We had five hours.
Leone told me to write a missing pet notice.
We tried to recall the ones we had seen recently:
"My name is Crodino, and I disappeared on Gagarin Street."
"Hi, I’m Lucio. If you see me, please let me into your garage and call my human."
"I’m Gino the cat from Ariosto Avenue. I don’t know why, but my ears are always dirty. Help me get home."
Each notice included a picture of the lost cat and a number to call.
They were all written in the first person, as if the cats themselves had penned them.
As for me, I couldn’t write a single word about Alma. No description seemed enough to explain who she was.
"Leone, forget it," I said. "There’s no need for a notice. We’ll find her, and my parents will never know she was lost."
I was sad, confused.
What if Alma preferred the city to our home?
I thought of Princess Maria Maddalena de’ Medici, who spent her life hidden away in the rooms and long corridors of a Florentine palace, now an archaeological museum.
I had learned her story when I visited the museum and saw her portrait: she wore a black dress and a long pearl necklace. At her side was a small dog with fur as white as Alma’s.
They say she was locked away because she was "malcomposta di membra"—badly formed in body. That’s how it was written. I never understood what it meant, and I still don’t: Did she have three legs? Five feet? Six knees?
No reason seemed good enough to keep her hidden.
Even the English poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who moved to Florence two centuries after Maria Maddalena de’ Medici, had a dog.
A cocker spaniel named Flush, who lived with her and witnessed the birth of her son.
Everyone should be born under the watchful eyes of an animal.
Under its wild scent and ears trained to sense danger.
Alma came into my life long after I was born.
From the start, I knew she would watch over me, and I over her.
I would see what she could not—because my cat had only one good eye.

To love is to offer shelter, food, water.
And sometimes, to lend your eyes when needed.

6. Elbows

"You came into the world with a somersault," my mother said when I asked how I was born.
Mom had the bad habit of telling tragic stories with the same indifference used for ordinary facts.
Flat voice, loading the dishwasher, she said I had almost suffocated with my umbilical cord during birth.
That tube of blood vessels and jelly had wrapped around my neck.
I imagined it red and creamy white, long like the gummy candies sold at the swan lake.
A somersault had saved my life.
A circus move.
Clowns always somersault to get back on their feet after tripping over buckets, steps, brooms, or their own shoes.
Maybe that’s why I chose running over other sports.
Not skiing, horseback riding, or boxing.
Something that kept me firmly on the ground with little chance of falling.
My coach was Lodovico Pampaloni, a gruff man passionate about track and gardening.
He sent me running for six, seven, ten kilometers, depending on his mood.
While I was gone, he would pull out hedge shears and a weed trimmer to "tidy up the field," as he liked to say—
"The field needs a good tidying up,"
"Good thing I’m here to tidy up the field,"
"After a tidying-up, the field is a whole different place."
He trimmed the hedges around the track with zeal.
He shaped the holly bushes carefully, making sure no branch strayed beyond the lines he had defined with his shears.
Woe to the vegetation that dared to cross those lines.
It would be cut down.
The grass in the field received the same treatment.
He mowed it every other day.
Nothing was allowed to grow too much.
Not even me.

"Don't grow up," he'd say, "or your head will fill up with nonsense."
To him, growing up meant becoming an idiot.
I knew that wasn't true, but I let him say it.
My parents never took me to competitions on Sundays.
Pampaloni would pick me up in his orange Fiorino.
A plush gorilla dangled from the rearview mirror, swinging at every turn.
I always swung too, torn between wanting to race and wanting to stay in bed.
The first option meant waking up early, skipping breakfast, sitting in Pampaloni's Fiorino among his tools, and enduring silent car rides because he never spoke while driving.
In truth, he barely spoke outside his van either.
If I won, he'd give me a firm pat on the back.
If I lost, he'd say, "We could've done better."
He always used the plural.
The only times he became talkative were when, in his opinion, I needed to lift my elbows.
Then he'd start yelling at me:
"Lift your elbows, don't let her pass you! Can't you see she's dead tired? Don't let her pass you, Xenia!"
In those moments, it wasn't the girl behind me who was dying, it was me, from embarrassment.
My heart tightened for my opponent, surely just as exhausted as I was.
I wanted so badly to tell her not to listen to my brute of a coach.
But instead, it was his voice that filled the air:
"Lift your elbows, damn it!"
I was the only one without parents in the stands or waiting at the finish line.
I had Pampaloni, who, when he was in a good mood, would take me to lunch at a trattoria.
After the race, he'd say, "We're celebrating today."
He'd say it while already chewing, his mind on the scallopini, the tortelli, and the meatballs in sauce he was about to devour.
My coach swallowed food without chewing.
He emptied his plate in two or three forkfuls and ordered coffee with his greasy beard.
The worst part came while waiting for the first course.
Instead of nibbling on a breadstick, Pampaloni would grab a slice of bread and pile centimeters of grated Parmesan on top.
If there was no cheese among the condiments, he'd ask for it in a voice just a few decibels lower than the one he used to tell me to lift my elbows.
He'd bring the slice to his mouth in a sudden motion, sending flecks of Parmesan flying everywhere—onto the glasses, the silverware, the floor.
Those meteors of cheese even reached my legs.

After he finished the slice, I always went to the bathroom.
It was the perfect excuse to stand up and shake off my clothes.
Despite his manners, I was grateful to Pampaloni.
Running was good for my head.
After training, everything fell back into place.
I no longer feared my parents' arguments, my body changing without warning as I became a young woman, or the days when Leone didn't show up.
I ran on the track and outside the sports field.
When I finished, drenched in sweat, I'd throw myself onto the grass.
I loved lying there, my gaze split between the clouds and the other kids training, each in their own way.
Some in the four-hundred-meter dash, some in shot put, some in pole vaulting.
I studied them. I wanted to be like them.
Before we said goodbye, Pampaloni would tell me how many minutes I had taken for each exercise.
We talked about my weak points and my strong ones.
We figured out how I could cover the same distances faster.
No one knew I did track and field.
No one, except Leone, knew that I had lost my cat and that if I wanted to find her before my parents got home, I'd have to move as fast as in a race walk or a triathlon.
Feet in the starting blocks.
Shoulders forward.
Hips up.
Ready.
Go!

7. Aries

We had five hours.
Alma had bolted—on all fours. She hadn't submitted to captivity like Princess Maria Maddalena de' Medici. Maybe because, unlike the princess, in her palace—our home—she didn't have a garden full of rosebushes to bury her nose in or orange trees to gaze at, especially when the fruits turned color and grew heavy enough to crash to the ground.
What if the cat had gone right there? The garden where the poor princess spent her rare moments of fresh air in the distant seventeenth century was, after all, just a few meters from our

house. The only problem: to reach it, we had to enter the archaeological museum, pretend to be visitors, put on a good face for the guards and custodians, and search for its entrance.

I had to try. Leone would come with me.

I hastily wrote a note to leave on the table in case my parents came home early:

"I went out with Leone. See you later."

Then I corrected it:

"I went out with Leone Arugula. See you later."

My father called Leone “Arugula” because he had a streak of green-dyed hair. A sprig of grass among his brown curls. "Arugula left his scarf here," "Arugula needs more sleep, he’s got dark circles under his eyes," "Arugula is a quiet guy," my father would say.

Luca Binardi had a nickname too: “Just a sec.” Not given by my father, but by the entire neighborhood. He was a man with salt-and-pepper hair and a straight, geometric fringe. He had the habit of speaking with his head tilted to one side, like a dog that’s caught a strange sound. His arms hung limply at his sides, framing his belly, squeezed into a checkered shirt. In any weather, he wore leather sandals with double straps, from which his thick, yellow, unruly toenails peeked out.

Despite looking like an ogre, Luca Binardi had a crystalline voice, which he used to reel in anyone who crossed his path and hold them captive for as long as possible.

"I really have to go now," people would say.

"Just a sec, just a little sec," he’d reply, confusing a moment with eternity.

Luca trapped people in the grip of his words, impossible to escape. He moved around by bicycle, braving the city’s broken and uneven cobblestones. Hanging from the sides of his rear wheel were bags full of flyers advertising exhibitions, concerts, and happy hours. His mission was to keep acquaintances and friends updated on local events. Binardi ignored the internet, both analog and digital. He was a champion of paper and word-of-mouth. He spotted his victims from afar, pedaled hard, and blocked their path.

I prayed not to run into him on my way to meet Leone, but I must not have prayed hard enough, because I saw him—and he saw me. I was doomed.

"Hey, Xenia, how are you?" he asked, rummaging through one of the side bags of his bike. "Here, take this flyer—next Tuesday, there's a movie premiere."

"Thanks, Just a sec," I said, stuffing the flyer clumsily into my pocket.

"And then your singer is coming."

"Who?"

"Come on, the one you like."

Just a sec was incredible. He remembered everything he was told, absorbed it, stored it, and then used it at the right moment.

"There are a lot of singers I like," I replied.

"But the one I mean is your favorite. She has the name of an animal." He looked up, as if the name might appear among the clouds.
"Aries?" I suggested.
"That's the one!" he nodded, digging through his bicycle pockets again.
As he rummaged and talked, talked and rummaged, a line from one of her songs popped into my head:
"And all those times you gave me your hoodie
With a pocket full of the troubles of a life
That fit you way too tight…"
Leone often lent me his hoodie when we went out. It reached my knees, I had to roll up the sleeves, but I didn't care. His hoodie wrapped me in an embrace I never wanted to leave.
"Oh no, Leone!" I thought. Who knew how long he'd been waiting for me?
I had to get rid of Just a sec.
I made a sudden move and took off running.
"Bye, Just a sec!" I called out.
"Wait, where are you going?" he asked. But his words were already fading, and the farther I ran, the more they became a jumble of meaningless sounds: "Grand openinggg, unmissableee, Wednesdaaaay, Xeniaaa, got itttt? Imghjkutyghpiouynljkyg..."
I was already gone.

8. The Hermit

As I ran, the house keys clipped to my carabiner jingled like a cowbell. Their sound mixed with the thud of my combat boots against the asphalt. I wore boots every season, even in summer, even when my mother said, "Watch out, moss will start growing inside them." I wore black boots and black eyeliner that sometimes melted, turning me into a zombie.
"What happened to you?" Leone asked when he saw me arrive, breathless and late.
"I ran into trouble," I replied quickly, catching my breath and rubbing my cheeks to wipe away any smudged makeup. "Come on, let's go. We have no time to waste."
The archaeological museum was empty that afternoon. We could even hear our own breathing. It wasn't going to be easy to go unnoticed.
We walked, eyes scanning the walls and doors. The entrance to the garden was our goal. Every so often, we paused in front of a display case to avoid drawing attention.
After wandering back and forth, we were disappointed to discover that our target was closed to the public and guarded by a woman seated in a wicker chair. She had the solidity of a caryatid. The only thing distinguishing her from an ancient relic was that she was on the phone, dictating a pumpkin lasagna recipe with such passion and precision that suddenly, the scent of leeks and

nutmeg seemed to waft through the halls, wrapping around burial artifacts, sarcophagi, amphorae, and hieroglyphs.

We knew we'd be waiting a while when, after the lasagna, she moved on to a potato gratin. We had to come back later. Eventually, she'd have to go to the bathroom or switch shifts, right?

We climbed the stairs. In the rooms upstairs, displayed in glass cases like chocolates in a box, were scarabs of various eras and shapes. The Egyptians considered them sacred. They set them in rings, placed them among mummy wrappings.

"Where there are scarabs, you'll find Alma," said a voice behind me.

"What?" I said, incredulous.

"I said, where there are scarabs, you'll find your cat," the voice repeated. "Don't look for her in the garden below or even in this building."

Speaking was an old woman hidden beneath layers of fine white veils.

"Are you a nun?" I asked.

"No, I'm a hermit."

"How do you know I lost my cat?"

"I just do."

Leone tugged at my sleeve. "Let's go. She's nuts," he whispered.

I wanted to leave too. Her words made no sense. And yet, something rooted me in place, in that exact spot, in front of this veiled woman who even knew my cat's name.

She pointed to a dung beetle in the display case. "It rolls its dung under the stars. You should see it, Xenia."

Then, arms raised, she began spinning in circles—like a dung beetle, in that cold, empty museum room.

"Go. Leave me alone," she murmured.

And we did.

9. Forever

A few steps from the museum, there was a square with arcades and stone steps. That's where the hermit led us. By now, she had realized I wasn't going to let her go easily—not before I got some more information about where Alma was.

At the center of the square stood an equestrian statue, next to a fountain crowded with pigeons drinking from its streams. The hermit also went to drink from the fountain. The wind lifted the edges of her robe, opening them like wings.

I asked her precise questions.

She answered in her own way.

Then, we started talking about luck.

She told me that scarabs brought good fortune.
That's why they ended up with mummies.
Mummies with scarabs could enter the afterlife and live forever.
Leone moved closer to me.
I recognized his scent.
The hoodies he lent me always smelled like him.
"And would you want that, Xenia?" he whispered.
"Want what?"
"To live forever."
I had never thought about it.
Eternity seemed like a hassle.
Eternal was the time before going into the sea after eating. I filled it with challenges and distractions: studying the ice cream menu, comparing classics and new flavors; watching the umbrellas and grouping them mentally by colors and patterns; choosing distant spots to reach and walking along the shore—at least getting my feet wet! I counted sun loungers and pairs of old friends strolling by in one-piece swimsuits, their silver hair and hands clasped behind their backs. They all looked alike in their outfits and the way they walked.

Only Tecla was different—very different. I knew her name because I had heard it from the Spanish bartender at Bagno Costa Azzurra, the beach club next to mine, where she spent her summers from June to September. Over the years, she had secured the best spot, just a few steps from the water.
"*Estás guapísima*, Tecla!" the Spanish bartender would shout. You're beautiful, Tecla.
She seemed to understand that he was complimenting her. She'd widen her tiny eyes, adjust the zebra-print sarong draped over her shoulders, and order a glass of milk—no coffee, because coffee sent her straight to the bathroom. Her nails were painted Ferrari red, and instead of a sun hat or a Panama, she wore a plastic swim cap covered in giant fuchsia flowers, matching her lip gloss. She really was different, and the bartender was right to tell her: "*Estás guapísima*, Tecla!"
Eternal was the ritual my mother forced upon me once a month.
"Today, we're giving you a good scrubbing," she would announce.
That was the opening line.
Then, she became the stable hand, and I was her foal.
She would sit me on her lap, grab a stiff-bristled brush, and run it through my hair, which reached halfway down my back.
If she hit a knot—which happened often—she would press even harder until the knot either untangled or got caught in the teeth of her brush.

To part my hair, she used a comb.
At this point, she transformed from a stable hand into a civil engineer.
She studied my head, taking measurements as if she were about to build a dam or a viaduct.
After completing her calculations, she would place the comb at the nape of my neck and drag a straight parting up to my forehead, scratching my scalp in the process.
The final stage of the ritual was the least painful.
It consisted of creating two tight French braids, secured with polka-dot ribbons.
I let her do it.
I endured it.
As soon as I was far enough from her gaze, I would free my hair, letting it move between my fingers like tentacles.
Eternal was the wait for the school bell.
I got lost among the lessons and the voice of Michele—the custodian with a wooden leg—echoing down the hallway. Michele talked to himself and to Lola, the school's dog. His voice was hoarse but cheerful. I loved him for that. For being cheerful.
"I don't know, Leone," I mumbled.
I wasn't able to answer him.
Never-ending things gave me a strange sense of unease.
As for "forever"—I didn't think about it at all.

10. The Feather and the Heart

Come to think of it, it was the hermit.
Every other sentence, she would say the word *eternity*.
She just couldn't help herself.
My parents, every other moment, would give me apple slices. I'd find them everywhere—on the bathroom shelves, on the table, in the living room between the samovar and the ashtray.
They stared at me menacingly, like swarms of mosquitoes.
To avoid arguments, I ate them.
Only once did I hide one in the couch, and my father found it weeks later.
I was lucky—the apple slice had shriveled up, turning small, wrinkled, and unrecognizable.
My father pulled that beige nugget from the couch. He examined it, then tossed it in the trash.
I watched in silence and let out a sigh of relief when I realized I was safe.
We were still in the square, surrounded by arcades and stone steps.
The hermit told us about a trial called the *weighing of the heart*.

It had to do with the mummies of ancient Egypt.
Of course.
"To enter the afterlife, having a scarab wasn't enough," she clarified. "They had to prove their heart was lighter than a feather. They had to place it on a scale before the god Osiris. If it was lighter than a feather, they could pass into the afterlife. If not, they would stay in the world of the living."
"Afterlife, this life, up-life, down-life," I snapped. "And what the hell does this have to do with Alma?"

"It does, my dear. You just need patience," the hermit replied. Then, out of nowhere, she curled up on the steps where we were sitting and fell asleep—just like baked pears collapsing at the bottom of a pan.
Leone and I started laughing quietly, careful not to wake her.
I liked Leone when he laughed because it revealed a tiny chip in one of his upper teeth.
"Can I touch it?" I asked.
Leone furrowed his brows.
So I reached out toward the chipped tooth—his left central incisor—and he opened his mouth, bewildered. It wasn't as sharp as I had expected.
After a few seconds, I pulled my hand back.
We were both a little breathless.
"I should get it fixed," he murmured.
I shook my head. To me, it should stay just as it was.
The hermit saved us from our awkwardness by suddenly stretching with groans and grunts.
She got up and immediately picked up where she had left off.
My grandmother did the same thing whenever she woke up from a nap in front of the television. She'd start clapping if the audience on the show was clapping, or blurting out answers if a quiz was on, never mind that her eyes were still puffy and her hair was flattened against the armchair.