

PART ONE:

# ASCENSION

# THE HOLLOW

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*The Hollow started with one line that I'd been playing around with. Sometime later, I was at the studio and began fleshing it out on John Medeski's Steinway piano when Josh wandered into the room. We started noodling around on the keys together and it hit me that maybe we could bring the "new and the old" together, much like we did with "Keeping the Blade." So we transposed "The Ring in Return" melody into what I was working on, while maintaining the foreboding beauty of what we wanted to capture with "The Hollow." I wound up finishing it at The Big Beige on a Wurlitzer, another musical element we thought we should bring in from the past.*

*With each note, The Hollow is meant to express the feeling of anxiety about not wanting to head out into a great new world alone. The idea of the All Mother was something I'd been considering for a while and had even thought about hiring a voice actor to do it. I'd thought about getting my wife, Chondra, to try it, since she's often there and involved in many facets of Evil Ink and the Coheed universe to a lesser degree—but it was Josh who wound up suggesting her to do it—which solidified to me that it might work. It did.*

===== THE HOLLOW =====

Sirius Amory walks determinedly across the bridge of his spacecraft, preparing a few last minute cross checks with the craft's computer main frame, the soothing , artificial intelligence he developed specifically for this mission. He calls her All Mother and as she's programmed to do, she takes the task of protecting Sirius very seriously. There is not a moment All Mother is not monitoring Sirius' vital signs, taking note of any changes in the atmosphere around the ship, navigating precisely where they need to go for various reasons.

Most importantly, the All Mother will be able to do all of this and more from the comfort of a mobile apparatus; a suit crafted by Sirius to take him beyond Heaven's Fence and directly into the blazing sapphire light known to him as the Keywork. His spacecraft, The Meriwell, named after his beloved wife, Meri, is too fragile to traipse into the Keywork's energy, and, like it's namesake, will remain a safe distance behind.

Not that this is the decision Sirius would have made for his wife. In his final moments at home on Valencine, he pleaded for her to join him on this journey into the unknown. "It will be our lives' greatest adventure!" he assured her. Yet, the only thing she could consider was the possibility of something going wrong...of being forced to watch as her husband was hurt or lost or worse. Instead, she had begged him to call off the entire endeavor, to remain at home with her and turn his research toward more reasonable avenues.

Staying at home, however, was never a real option for Sirius. This exploration was the thing he was born to do. For as long as he can remember, he's felt a magnetic pull toward the Keywork, the glowing beams that envelop the worlds of Heaven's Fence like an all-encompassing question. It was the very reason he became a scientist, thrusting himself into breaking down all the current and accepted theories about small interplanetary gravitational fields. Along with developing seemingly far-fetched hypotheses of his own, Sirius had disproved research with others in the scientific community had spent their lives pursuing, making him one of the most controversial-researchers in all of Heaven's Fence. But this is how Sirius thrived most efficiently. When left to his own devices and without others consuming his mental energy with their own theories and needs, he had always felt most productive. Most comfortable.

The one exception to this was Meri, who had been a driving force in his life since the day they met, over a decade ago on Hetricus. She had always been his biggest fan and the person who understood his brilliance long before anyone else could. Now she had refused to join him and though he hadn't had time yet to allow the seriousness of their last fight to sink in, the idea that she may not be there waiting for him when he returns has begun to creep into his psyche.

It was less than thirteen months ago that he had—after sleepless nights turned to sleepless months and years—at last found the missing piece. It had been staring at him all along. A star seemingly planted in the middle of a portion of the Keywork, its emission calculations elevated ever so slightly, giving away its location. Then, he found another, like a needle in a haystack of energy. He used the distance between these two to approximate where the others may lie, finding a total of seven. Seven perfect stars serving as points to connect the beams of blue light. They have since been named after him, The Stars of Sirius, concluding that the structure served to hold all seventy-eight planets of Heaven's Fence in position and quite possibly, provide the worlds with the essential mineral and chemical elements each needs to sustain life. Sirius believed it could unlock the mysteries of humankind. His Keywork.

The scientific community did not support his theory. They still do not, even at this moment, as Sirius is suited up, striding through the fog that tends to accumulate in the bottom portion of the aircraft, earning it the nickname of The Hollow. Every day of his existence has been building to this moment, but for the first time, the reality of the potential consequences rises up within Sirius, heavy as the bay door that stands between him and the Keywork. He wonders if this could be his final breath. There's a chance he won't last more than an instant out there, incinerating the second he comes in contact with the energy. For the first time, the familiar system he's spent a lifetime discerning seems alarmingly alien, but even so, the allure of the unknown is far more persuasive to Sirius than fear. And so he continues on.

The bay door opens, letting in free-flowing gas which mixes with the fog, reminding Sirius of walking into a storm. His eyes are synchronized with the fog the robotic song of the All Mother's voice in his ear, setting his course into the Keywork, where the gaseous indigo may welcome him with open arms...or gnashing teeth.

TWO

KEY ENTITY EXTRACTION I:

# DOMINO THE DESTITUTE

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*I wrote Domino just before the final Michael Todd episode. We tried everything we could to help him, but despite so much potential and support all around him, he couldn't avoid the pitfalls of this world that we, as a band, reside in.*

“It’s incredible,” Sirius can’t help but say aloud into his helmet, as he floats about in the wonderous blue, noting the shades shifting and swirling from navy to the lightest of aquamarine. He fumbles for a suction container from a compartment in his suit, to begin collecting samples. He considers whether the color changes are a result of energy shifts--possibly the molecules circulating to maintain equilibrium--; then he does something completely new to him; Sirius puts the container back and allows himself a few profound moments of enjoyment. He is the very first person who has been to this place, the first man to ever question information known to be true about the haze although it had surrounded every world the same since the beginning of existence. Seventy-eight planets filled with beings who accepted what they’d been told about the blue without hesitation. But not Sirius.

A sense of accomplishment rushes through him. Pure adrenaline. That persecution by his scientist peers seems worth it now that he is here. Then... something..

Sirius is bewildered, as from out of the silence, tiny scattered noises begin to fill the space around him, leaking into his helmet.

*La la la...la la la la.*

The eerie whispers grow. Louder still, they sneak into his consciousness, as the glow of the Keywork begins to pulse and a move, ever so subtly, like a million maggots weaving within it. The haze densifies from transparent to translucent. The micro-movements to strengthen, gaining more definition until Sirius can make out human shades and heads squirming to get out, as if an endless sheer blue veil was pulled taut over them and they can’t seem to escape. All Mother cannot identify the composition of what they are seeing through scientific classification of any sort. She scans all of her databases and comes up with over 100 words, borrowed from every dialect within Heaven’s Fence, and though Sirius cannot make sense of it, the words all have nearly the same translation: Souls.

Without warning, one entity forcefully makes his way through the mass of entities, pushing them aside with pure muscle. This is the soul of Domino, who bursts from the mass into Sirius, overcoming and possessing him, his essence churning through every organic fiber in his body. He struggles desperately for control.

“I am unable to process your brain wave function, Sirius. Troubleshooting now,” drones All Mother. But Sirius cannot respond. He cannot move to check whether the electrodes secured at the base of his skull have come loose. He is with Domino, viewing him through the eyes of a voyeur. He is Domino, sharing the entity’s every emotion, most intense of these being the feeling of complete hopelessness. Sirius’ possession by the entity gives him a dual perspective, a perfectly clear view of the impact of another person’s choices in life, juxtaposed with the reasons and traits that drove the choices in the first place. Domino hasn’t learned much in his afterlife and feels that this human, the only one ever to enter the Keywork, could be a conduit to return to the living world.

Sirius finds himself in a vast maze, constructed of the memories that torment Domino’s consciousness, the blurred images dripping down the walls like liquid holograms and solidifying before him. He’s unsure how to navigate the maze on his own, but Domino’s soul shows him where to begin...

In Domino’s living body, he was a boxer with incredible potential. His biggest supporter and trainer, was his younger, newly married brother Chess. The brothers were a great team, but as Domino ran up the ranks undefeated, he demanded more of Chess’s attention and time. Domino had begun to feel slightly envious of his brother’s new found happiness—like a third wheel—when his flawless record began to attract the attention of a local organized crime boss, Kriptor Noncruss. Kriptor saw potential in Domino, showing up at the gym and at his fights, planting dreams of big, beautiful things in his mind, promising Domino money and fame, while he reaped the payout on Domino’s fights. Chess disapproved of his brother’s involvement with such a seedy character, even as Kriptor continued to wedge Chess out from Domino’s life.

Giving way to Kriptor's allure, Domino became increasingly willing to do anything to get to the top, doping himself up to win fights as his talents started slipping. Eventually he became so addicted to the drugs, money and fame that he started taking bigger risks for his "friend," dependent on a man who took advantage of him in every way possible.

Sirius navigates each phase of Domino's life as if here were a train on a pre-determined path, leading up to an eventual destination, though he has no idea what that might be or how long he'll be forced to travel for it. He fights against the desires of Domino, trying to extract the entity from his mind. He reaches into the morphing walls of the maze, trying to find a way out, but his manipulation does nothing. Intuition pushes him forward, promising a release if he can just keep going...

A memory begins to coagulate, thickening and darkening just before a new scene bubbles up inside, bursting from within the gelatinous exterior of the wall and flooding the maze with images of the interior of a packed stadium of screaming fans. It is here Domino was pitted up against the reigning champion of the ring, Saul "the Ghostmaker" Maven in what was meant to be the fight of the century. The damage to his body and lack of focus was too much and he lost the fight in a stunning knockout, unlocking the floodgate to his complete decline. At his lowest—Krip offered him a quick solution: If Domino would help him out with an armored car heist, he's share the big payout. Domino saw this as his chance at redemption. Trying to mend the relationship with Chess, Domino offered him a role in the plan—knowing he could've used the money, after all and would to anything to help his older brother. The heist went horribly wrong, with Chess getting shot.

Sirius watches all of this happen, as if it were occurring in real time, feeling all the pain and desperation of Domino as the final scene begins to play. All Mother continues her attempts to communicate, but her voice remains white noise to Sirius, Domino is lying propped up against the wall on the street, helpless as his brother slumps to the cobblestone and takes his last breath.

Completely devastated, he realizes what he's done. Domino puts the gun in his mouth and suddenly, the perspective changes and Sirius is Domino, holding the gun.



*Let go of me, Domino.*

*Not a chance, man. You're gonna take me back down there.*

Sirius is acutely aware that this is a definitive moment; the single most regretted event in Domino's life. This must be the destination the maze has been easing him toward; the exact moment of Domino's complete and utter destitution.

*Suddenly, he understands. This is the way out.*

Sirius pulls the trigger, severing the possession Domino has on him. Domino screams, a hair-raising, unearthly sound that, in turn, resonates a destructive frequency through the All Mother, who transmits the tone through her hard connection to Sirius' ship, causing it to explode in the quiet of space.

THREE

## THE AFTERMAN

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*The title track was written a little over two years ago in Florida. Chondra and I were coming back from a long day lounging on a boat without cell reception, when she decided to hop on Facebook. In that moment she had discovered a very close friend had just passed away. I remember the cold impersonal blue glare glowing against her face...the emotions and tears released in an instant. It was unlike anything I had ever witnessed. Her questions started pedaling between reality and disbelief, but her emotions were too strong to know what to believe. I started to feel like this was the closest thing to her experiencing my death. It set the tone of loss for this album.*

Back on the planet Valencine, Meri Amory has been throwing herself into work since her husband left to chart course on what, in her opinion, may as well be a suicide mission. She had no intention of arguing with him that day, or any day for that matter. Confrontation where Sirius was concerned had always been something she avoided at all costs, both because she hated any unrest between them, and because he spent enough time fighting with the entire scientific populace. That is Meri, ever supportive, skilled at moving her needs to the back burner to accommodate the desires of the people she loves. And Sirius is at the very top of that list.

Meri can't help blaming herself for this unresolved fight, when she'd known well before the day she married him that with a man as gifted and bull headed as Sirius, the possibility of even his wildest dreams coming true wasn't so unreasonable. She remained confident that if she stood by him to see his goals through, eventually, he would return the favor and they would have a child, maybe two. They would go on vacations and take up new hobbies and watch the Keywork illuminate the dark sky from the comfort of some blanket in the park. They would be normal. Instead, he planned to not only endanger himself, but possibly take every one of those hopes with him. Deep down, she thought that if he was truly faced with the prospect of losing her or giving up this expedition, he would choose her.

Then he did not. Could she get used to this terrible feeling of not being a priority? Should she be gone when he returns just to teach him a lesson? Would he even care if she did leave? Was she overreacting?

“And adding insult to injury,” Meri thinks, taking her eyes off the fluff piece she is meant to be writing about the overpopulation of feral cats on Valencine, “He named his damn ship after me! Well, go on Sirius—head off into nowhere with the more adventurous, bold other woman.”

She sighs, her emotions falling somewhere in the trinity between annoyance, longing

and debilitating fear. Meri returns to her work, but nothing good is coming out. She can't find her words—even the most elementary ones required for the ridiculous story in front of her. With the afternoon having gotten away from her, Meri decides to do some mindless web browsing on what is an incredibly advanced version of what we know as a computer. There are no keys, no tangible screen, only thoughts that trigger searches. Her immediate mind search for “current events” brings dozens of stories up holographically into the air in front of her, but she only sees one

BREAKING NEWS: CONTROVERSIAL RESEARCHER SIRIUS AMORY FEARED DEAD AFTER UNEXPLAINED EXPLOSION, ENDING PRIVATELY FUNDED ENDEAVOR TO SELF-PROFESSED “KEYWORK”

Meri rereads the headline, skipping to key phrases: Possible system failure. Recovered burned debris from Amory's ship, The Meriwell. No chance of survival. The images from the web search disappear, as her mind wipes clean of every thought, every emotion, everything she knows in that moment. She sees the information, but it is not real. How could it possibly be? She's in their home and there is the photo they took only last week and his shoes by the door and... Her body accepts the news a few moments before her brain, throwing her to the ground like a paper doll, the flood delayed. Then the tears come and don't seem to stop.

She is overwhelmed, yet depleted, lying on the cold floor when they come. Reporters from every major news outlet and beyond, calling, messaging, knocking at her door; trying to reach her on every form of communicator they can find. They want information: *“Have you heard the news?” “Can we get your reaction?” “What kind of person was Sirius?” “When was the last time you spoke to him?” “Can you tell us more about what your husband was looking for?”*

Was. Meri realizes that as long as she refuses to acknowledge them at all, as long as she answers no questions, hears nothing...then she can remain in the loving arms of disbelief.

She is not waiting for news, not waiting for someone to pull her out of this nightmare. She is only waiting for Sirius to defy the odds again, like he always does, and return home.

## MOTHERS OF MEN

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*As the Occupy movement was happening, I found myself considering the idea of protest in general and what makes the public decide they have enough differences to take a stand. Coheed is not a political band and this song is no real exception. Instead, it evolved out of thinking about how people change. Their interests; their needs; their political stance; whatever they may be. Music, in particular, is one of those things that people gravitate to in their formative years.*

*We start listening to certain bands or types of music in our youth and sometimes grow out of them to fit in with what's hip or what feels cool with our peers at that moment. But there's something to be said about recognizing where you came from and the things that helped you grow into the adults you are now.*

Free of Domino, Sirius journeys deeper into the blue. He's still trying to process what has just happened to him. From his experience within the maze, he's deduced that an individual's persona in life, echoes as energy in death through the beams of the Keywork. If Domino is any kind of example, a tormented person in life is a negative energy in death, whereas a good person in life will output positive energy in the after.

Yet, Sirius still has a great deal to learn. He will soon find that these souls—in all their rage and joy, sadness and virtue—make up the beams of light, eternally forced (or so it seems) to emit energy for the greater good. His next discovery will be that the Keywork doesn't discriminate against positive or negative energy. It's all equally valuable to the output. This is the cause of tremendous unrest within the Keywork, where many of the souls, on either end of the spectrum, protest for their individuality. Most of the entities who've been well-behaved in life, banking on the possibility of a heaven and hell type scenario, are unhappy to find that their 'afterlife' in the Keywork is no better than the 'afterlife' of the entities who were criminals and murderers. Some of those who were hateful in life are angry that they have no chance at redemption in the after...or are content to maintain that attitude. They are all destined to commingle eternally, their energies as divisive here as they were in life. There is no one for them to bring their discontent to, until Sirius shows up, the first human to ever enter the Keywork. Sirius is very attractive to the souls; the good, who want recognition for their positive behavior and the bad entities seeking salvation, who can't attain change in death. They can feel his presence, this man in the after...

The deeper Sirius gets into the Keywork, the more he discovers the parallel world beyond—a never-ending, monochromatic, fictional plane, where these souls remain as tangible energy. It is an entirely neutral place, neither bad nor good. Sirius does not know it yet, but the bland landscape is the projection of the entities, having been exposed to the repeating loop of their lives playing out within the maze, over and over, until even the most poignant moments of their human lives feel mundane. Later, he will come to know this place

as The Mono.

Submerged in the unfamiliar, Sirius can't help but try to regain his mental bearings, as if his brain were pushing familiar, comforting things into his mind. Like notches cut into a mountainside as he climbs, these are spaces to hold on to, to keep him steady; *A morning walk with Meri. The tiny smile on her lips as she slept. Her tip-toeing around the kitchen, recreating some elaborate concoction she's seen on the holoscreen earlier that day. The way she'd scratch her left hand uncontrollably when she was mad or scared or upset.* After years of studying her and working to uncover the structure of his wife, he could list a million things that made up this phenomenon called Meri. A million things to love. A million things he'd already begun to miss.

Sirius explores the world, searching for a way out, he is careful not to draw attention to himself, moving in hidden places as he goes, fully aware that the world is contained, endless, yet somehow limited; until he reaches out and finds he is able to physically peel back a portion of the space around him, as if the atmosphere itself was a tangible substance. He's startled and confused to find that the area beyond what's been peeled away is in full, stunning color, similar to that of the planets he knows—only incredible beyond anything anyone could ever comprehend. It is a perfect Utopia beyond this place, bathed in a warm glow...the purest light he's ever seen. His innate tendency to give things definition—to name them—can conjure up nothing. Suddenly, the piece draws back up, concealing his discovery and returning to its previous mundane appearance.

**(AUTHOR'S NOTE:** The world within the Keywork is the first stop of the two levels of the afterlife. The first, where Sirius is at the moment, is actually more of a purgatory, though the souls are unaware that this is not necessarily their final resting place. Life, it turns out, was simply a trial run for this stage, where souls must coexist together with their own individual problems and demands, until they learn that true peace can only come from the shedding of the simplistic human agendas, the letting go of the consciousness reserved for physical bodies rather than souls. They must let go of everything. Once the souls stop looking out only for themselves—shirking the “me, me, me,” attitude that leads to regret, unfinished business and unrest—they can move to the collective conscious, to the perfect Utopian afterlife)



## GOODNIGHT, FAIR LADY

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*I was at a restaurant with my wife, and this incredibly creepy gentleman was sitting at the end of the bar. There was something about him that was so uncomfortable and out of place—like a predator lying in wait. My imagination got away from me and all of a sudden, I couldn't stop thinking about the bar turning into a Broadway musical: The lights blazing toward this guy as he would jump out of his seat and start performing a full theatrical production of his sinister intentions.*

=====GOODNIGHT, FAIR LADY=====

Meri realizes she needs to get out of the house. Nearly six months have passed since Sirius was declared dead and she's been struggling with the utter devastation that comes with losing a spouse, coupled with her guilt for the way their relationship and begun to backslide in the time before he left for the Keywork. She has so many doubts...so many questions...so many regrets...but her friends and family keep pushing her to stop acting like she's the one who's dead. In an effort to be around people and remember what it's like to be alive, she decides to stop by a local bar, a low-key pub called The Fair Lady. She is there without any real intentions, planning to have a drink or two, people watch, possibly have a regular chat with someone who won't see her through sympathetic eyes. She's sick of the way everyone looks at her, feeling sorry for her, whispering the dreaded word in hallways far enough away that they believe she can't hear: "Widow."

Her arrival at the bar (and lack of companion) doesn't go unnoticed, attracting the attention of Dyer Grinlock, a local lowlife who makes himself comfortable on the empty barstool beside her. He boldly strikes up a conversation, noting her wedding band and asking why any man would leave his beautiful wife to drink alone. She is guarded in her answers, thinking to herself that maybe this was a bad idea; maybe she's not ready to mingle after all. Not wanting to be rude, she sips at something strong, as Grinlock continues to try to impress her, eventually slyly knocking the glass over. It smashes on the floor between them.

Realizing that this night is kind of a bust, Meri begins collecting her things, thanking Grinlock for the company, as frustrated tears start to well up in the corners of her eyes. By the time she's turned around from putting her coat on, he's ordered another drink for her, this one with a secret "friend at the bottom" ; an illegal tasteless, colorless sedative. She tries to decline, but her pursuer, noting her emotional fragility, tries to keep her there, offering up some words of encouragement. "Sometimes it's alot easier to see the glass half-full with a glass half-empty. You wanna talk about it?"

Meri smiles begrudgingly, reaching for the glass, just as a man comes, seemingly from out of nowhere and places his hand over the top of the beverage. This is Officer Graves Colten, an undercover police officer who's been watching the whole scene go down. They've been trying to nail this perp for months. His partner cuffs Grinlock, taking him into custody. Colten gives his card to Meri, requesting that she swing by the station the following day to give a report. Little does she know, the officer will eventually become her new love interest.

KEY ENTITY EXTRACTION II:

# HOLLY WOOD THE CRACKED

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*As Coheed's presence has increased in the world of music, along with the open door policy the internet gives into people's lives, you have to be prepared for a certain level of your personal life to be public. I try to be pretty transparent; especially where fans are concerned, because I feel like it's a great way to get to know the individuals who give so much of themselves to this band. We make ourselves available at conventions or after shows, in an attempt to show our appreciation for the dedicated people who enjoy our art and it's almost always a really awesome experience.*

*Sadly, over the last few years, there were a couple of cases of fans who crossed the line from interest into threatening situations and harassment, to the point where it was scary, and I know most people in the public eye experience this. I began to think a lot about how emotion can turn so quickly in the mind of an unstable person; how admiration can change to hate overnight, and be directed toward someone they might think they know well because they follow them on Twitter or follow closely the art they create.*

Very deep into the Keywork now, the scientist in Sirius is making the most of his time there, attempting to collect samples of the residual energy to take back with him. He's hesitant to do or take anything too drastic, nervous that his presence could disrupt the molecular ecosystem, but this discovery of the afterlife has been bigger than he could have ever imagined. Still, he's plagued with nagging questions about the mission. He can't seem to find the way out of this place. What if he never does? His nutrient supply, delivered intravenously via the mobile suit, could, in an emergency, be stretched out longer than expected. But what if Meri was right? What if he's fated to die out here in the Keywork?

Though doing his best to remain unseen in the strange world, Sirius can't shake the feeling that something...or someone is following him. The energy around him is relentless, compulsive. His massive helmet blocks some of his peripheral vision as he turns in a full circle to find the source of the energy, his nervousness increasing rapidly to panic.

"Second entity identified," warns the All Mother.

Simultaneously, a flowing form rises from the ground as if it had been lying there facedown all along. It's ethereal, female hands claw their way up his legs frantically, just before making eye contact and entering Sirius' body. The soul has been following him the whole time, her attention growing into fanatical interest in Sirius. This entity doesn't want to take Sirius' body to return to Heaven's Fence. She's mesmerized with this human the souls have deemed the Afterman...and wants to keep him right here.

The panic Sirius felt seconds before is instantly swapped with a sensation of complete obsession, as he is possessed by the shrieking, erratic entity of *Holly Wood the Cracked*. In Holly's clutches, Sirius relieves her frenetic, roller coaster past from within the shifting labyrinth, just as he experienced Domino's.

Holly, in life, was a wannabe starlet, fixated on celebrity. She would do anything to be near fame, going to dangerous lengths to feel she was connected to celebrities, somehow.

Concealed beneath her clothes, engraved into her flesh like a trophy case of scars, read the names of the celebs she adored. But all of the idols she lusted over, no one monopolized her attention like Madame Crisis Maroe, a vibrant actress. Holly idolized MCM's every move, mimicking her mannerisms to complete duplication. She regularly stole from the boutique where she worked to mirror the lifestyle of MCM, spending the stolen cash on plastic surgeries, maiming her body in an attempt to resemble the starlet, but becoming a monster-like caricature in the process.

After trying to break into MCM's mansion one night, a restraining order was issued, but it did nothing to deter Holly. On the contrary, it encouraged her to know that now...yes, finally...MCM knew that she existed. It fueled her neuroses, pushing her obsession to its breaking point.

Sirius watches from far within the liquescent maze of Holly's memories, anticipating how much further this soul could have taken her fixation, unsure what would drive someone to be so consumed...so destroyed by an interest. Is this a lesson he is meant to learn in regard to his own sometimes obsessive attention to his work? Sirius can't be sure as the memory stream of Holly's life builds toward a climax. He can hear her thoughts.

*There cannot be two. **THE WORLD HAS NO ROOM FOR TWO.***

Suddenly, Sirius is at a public appearance of MCM, with people out in droves to see the actress. MCM is supernaturally beautiful, obviously special in a way that surely directed her to fame. Then Holly is there too, without warning, firing a handgun at MCM. No less than five shots. The star falls and in this second, Sirius knows Holly is at her most "cracked."

In retaliation, a handful of security guards, one of them being Sirius who recognizes this is the moment for him to escape the possession, aim to fire back at Holly. Before Sirius can pull the trigger, the entire memory condenses into a solid and begins to combust, cracking apart as if someone is punching their way into the physical structures of the flashback. A series of BOOM's rip through the air, loud and bass-driven enough to break ear drums by way of dislocation.

The words echo through Sirius' consciousness: "He's mine."

A new entity smashes into the scene. This is Vic the Butcher.

KEY ENTITY EXTRACTION III:

# VIC THE BUTCHER

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*A few years ago, my wife and I were renting an apartment in the Village, Bleecker and MacDougal, #184. We had been married less than a year...just living it up in this amazing point in our lives. One night we went to a show with a group of friends and I wound up getting into it with one of them to the point where I knew if I didn't just get out of the situation, things could get bad. So, knowing that about myself, I took off alone and went home to give myself a cooling off period. Nevertheless, Chonny was angry that I left the show without her. In my mind, I knew she was safe with my friends and would understand my moods enough to know that I needed to get out immediately—She wouldn't talk to me. The immature side of me blew things out of proportion and the next day, I started to write this song about the course of events that evening how one "strike of a match" could have burned this entire relationship and friendship down.*



=====KEY ENTITY EXTRACTION III: VIC THE BUTCHER=====

There are abrupt slams and crunches, as Vic The Butcher violently tries to force Holly out of Sirius's body. Sirius doesn't have a moment to breathe or regain his bearings. He's thrust from the chaos of Holly's possession, straight into the horrific tangled maze of Vic's sinister life.

Vic was a tyrannical Army Lieutenant General whose lack of empathy and disregard for rules made him very successful. Sirius can see the majority of Vic's conquest in life were based on loopholes, illegal activities, and dirty dealings, yet because of his power, he's managed to instill fear in so many of those who worked beneath him, that his orders remained unquestioned. Even as a young recruit, Vic impressed higher ups, returning from more than one mission as the last man standing, painting himself as stealthy and brave, when in reality, he'd killed the other members of his crew so they wouldn't reveal his torture tactics on the field. Vic moved up the ranks and began to brainwash his platoons, tormenting those who questioned any of his decisions. More than one promising young soldier returned from their first off-world military tour with missing limbs, near fatal burns, and wounds inflicted by their very leader as a form of psychological warfare...and all were too terrified to tell. The later part of his military career, while stationed on a distant foreign planet, Vic found out that a band of terrorists were hiding in a nearby camp, amongst a number of innocent people far outweighing that of the enemy.

Knowing that it was against "standard" protocol, he called a promising Sergeant Major named Sentry into his private quarters to give him a secret order to bomb the building. It did not go over well, with Sentry defying the orders, arguing that protocol requires they attempt to draw the insurgents out to avoid civilian casualties. Vic assured Sentry that he didn't care what the "book" said and guaranteed that Sentry would regret his insubordination. Regardless, Sentry refused to murder the innocent, and told Vic he planned to report the illegal order to the Field Marshal in their platoon. In retaliation, that night, Vic, a true megalomaniac and ruthless man, ordered Sentry secretly hung by some of his "dirty" soldiers in a deserted portion of the barracks, as he watched.

Sirius witnesses this, trapped in the aqueous barricade and wondering if it's the time

that he is meant to act in order to get himself out of Vic's retrospective maze. Surely someone will intervene, rather than let an innocent man be hung for his refusal to participate in a murder! This HAS to be the moment that Vic is at his most evil. The time that he is truly a butcher? Sirius watches as Sentry's body twists and turns; the life pouring out of him. No one does anything to stop it.

Sirius panics as he looks around for a weapon to try and kill Vic, noticing a gun in the waistband of one of the accompanying soldiers. He grabs for it repeatedly, but the gun is intangible and his fingers can't seem to grasp it. It's as if the weapon is some kind of hologram...something he can't physically touch. Sirius is terrified. How will he be able to remove himself from this possession if he can't pinpoint the right moment?

The maze shape-shifts around Sirius, carrying him forward on a rolling ground swell. After the murder, Vic sent word to Sentry's family that he had committed suicide, citing the intense mental strain of being in the military and expressing his sympathies on behalf of the Army. The events jump years later into Vic's life, where he was living domestically in building 184, a brownstone on the edge of a quiet world with his wife, retired from the military to avoid the spotlight. His evils finally caught up with him and he was extradited and charged for his heinous war crimes and gross misconduct, with a trial by jury ahead. Vic, refusing to go down in shame and face trial, decided to burn down the building he lived in, with both he and his wife inside...as well as hundreds of other residents and a nursery school on the bottom floor.

The moment shifts, back to the event as if it were happening for the first time; Vic standing there in the basement of the building, the smell of gasoline rising up and soaking everything. It becomes clear to Sirius that THIS is the true epitome of Vic's terrible crimes. Suddenly Sirius is Vic, the match flickering in his hands. This, not the hanging of Sentry, is the moment he's been waiting for. Yet, Sirius stands conflicted. To remove himself from the possession, he knows he has to set the fire, but this experience is different: There are children involved. Would going through with this connect him in any way to the murder of innocent people? He's nearly lost in Vic's essence, but he can still make out the line of his own morality. Sirius simply can't set the fire. He extinguishes the flame.

In turn, Sirius feels the soul of Vic the Butcher raging inside him, evil trapped and

spreading into his body. The All Mother, speaks to the unconscious Sirius, inquiring about his well-being. His strength and physiological levels are dropping at an unnatural, alarming rate. She survey's the unit. Sirius can't endure anymore or he will die.

KEY ENTITY EXTRACTION IV:

# EVAGRIA THE FAITHFUL

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*It's easy to underestimate the concept of faith, until you need it for something. This track serves as the opposite to the one before, so from the conceptual side of things, it makes sense that Vic the Butcher and Evagria the Faithful are almost like Yin and Yang. There is a recurring theme of loss in this record, particularly the fear of losing a partner. This song came together after thinking about how I would feel if things had gone differently in the events recounted before, if something had happened to my wife that night or ever. When a person you love is gone, nothing else matters. The parts of life that seemed relevant or irrelevant even...they all get sucked into this overwhelming, encompassing sense of loss.*

=====KEY ENTITY EXTRACTION IV: EVAGRIA THE FAITHFUL=====

Just as he is almost wholly consumed by the evil energy of Vic, All Mother pauses her reading of his levels to say, “Unidentified entity approaching.”

The tone begins to shift slowly and a warm light overwhelms him from above, as if the essence of all that is good is pulling him up and out of Vic’s energy.

Now Sirius is being cradled by a new soul, one that has managed to transcend into the Utopia, having shed her human consciousness. This soul is Evagria the Faithful and she has come to rescue Sirius from Vic’s tight grip, bathing the Afterman in healing, positive light as he begins to settle into her expansive, intangible embrace. In her arms, he is able to glimpse the second level of the afterlife, where everything is ideal and incredibly peaceful. There is a soothing light, like the soft focus lens radiating all around, and Sirius, in his poor health, can’t believe what he’s seeing...and this is only a fragment of the beyond. The landscape of this new place is incomparable to anything he knows...abstract and beautiful in the sense that he just can’t understand it. One might call it psychedelic, but more so that it’s entirely incomprehensible and nothing has the same representation it has in the worlds he knows on Heaven’s Fence. This plane of the Keyowrk is wholly unique, differentiating itself from anything a human could perceive. It’s the culmination of perfect harmony and oneness, where need and desire no longer exist.

Evagria projects faith and an all-encompassing field of vibrations, creating a perimeter around Sirius which keeps all other souls out and protects Sirius. Evagria chooses to share with him the life she once lived, taking him along on a replaying of her own story. In this case, the events do not appear disheveled and erratic within the same maze Sirius has experienced with the other entities. Instead, they flow in clean, smooth succession like a river.

Evagria is truly a good soul. In her living body, she was always strong and caring, taking care of those around her. She gave of her time through her career in social work, eventually adopting three at risk children on her own, from underfunded orphanages off-world. Evagria focused much of her life on raising them, ensuring they had every advantage in life, starting with a mother who gave them her time. When a political protest tore through her planet, Evagria was one of the first to volunteer at a local hospital to care for the victims,

regardless of whether they shared the same views she did. She was unconcerned with petty disagreements and felt that times of collective human suffering were the ideal opportunity to bring people together through compassion.

The pathways open up, trickling gently past Sirius and into the memory of a hospital room, years later, where Evagria laid surrounded by flowers, balloons, and cards pleading with her to 'get well soon.' Even when diagnosed with a rare bone disease mid-life, she never showed weakness; rather, she spent her final days comforting her friends and family as they watched her succumb to the devastating disease that kept her in tremendous pain. When she finally passed away, her children were left with a solid set of morals and an understanding that they would carry on the charitable ways of their mother. Evagria's soul is spiritual and in line with the fair and honest side of humanity. Sirius observes that she is a good samaritan and in this moment, she comes to act as Sirius' savior from the souls who want him.

But she can only hold the other entities off so long...

# SUBTRACTION

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*I don't think it's any secret that we, like so many bands now and before us, are away from home and our families more than we are not. This holds even truer for families with loved ones in the military or even those with long distance commutes. Without sounding ungrateful, it can be really difficult on everyone involved. This song is written for the people we leave behind and the things they endure creating a life with an absentee person playing a lead role.*

=====SUBTRACTION=====

In Evagria's embrace, Sirius has a moment of clarity, comprehending more of the complexities of this afterlife. He is aware of at least two separate levels of consciousness within it, allowing unresolved souls to exist eternally within a bland maze that echoes their living energy and the enlightened souls who transcend the maze, moving forward into a Utopia he will ultimately name in honor of the entity; the Samaritaine. Through Evagria, he understands that to progress, one must constantly let go of the qualifiers that define them as an individual, in life and here in death. Sirius reflects on his own life with this knowledge.

He realizes the mission to the Keywork was, of course, about advancing the scientific community and finding truth, but also about his own personal fulfillment. Sirius has always felt he lacked the social advantages of others in finding camaraderie, collaborating with other scientists, making personal connections that may increase funding for his research. Sirius' only leg up was persistence. And it was this relentless refusal to give up that pushed his exploration into uncharted territory—while driving his relationship to a breaking point.

This contemplation leads to his reflection on his marriage and the great love he left behind. In retrospect, he is able to pinpoint dozens of moments that Meri could have seized, to save herself from the great pain he would eventually inflict with his absence.

Sirius has always known this could happen. For years he pleaded that his occupation demanded he put himself in this position. This was the life of a research scientist. But in reality, it was never about what he did for a living. It was the drive to do something more significant than others, Sirius wanted to be proud of himself, to make Meri proud, to keep her near him so she could share this great discovery with him. He believed he could have it all with her by his side, never considering that her love for him would prevent her from agreeing to put him in harm's way. He begins to deeply feel her absence, wishing that she was there to see all the beautiful things he's discovered.

Meri had warned him that she was threatened by his departure to the point of leaving,



but how could she be the one to leave if he's destined to be the one who will never return?  
With these two enormous concepts plaguing his life, Sirius wonders, in death, would his energy resonate the drive that defined him...or would his maze lead up to the moment he deserted his wife?

PART TWO:

# DESCENSION

# PRETELETHAL

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*An exploration of sound. I had wanted to toy around with a bunch of new gadgets I'd picked up on the road to see what they were all about. I remember spending half a day up in my little studio at The Beige just playing around with noises. I wound up with this really long song, but then decided to scale back to just one simple statement: Who will repair this broken heart? When someone is in pain, that's all they can think about. It's all-consuming. I didn't want to take away the strength of that sentiment.*

In this moment the innumerable lost souls of the Keywork, along with the tree entities of Domino, Hollywood and Vic, start to converge on the safety net of Evagria, reaching for the prize within her: The Afterman. Knowing that she holds the one being who may be able to help free them from this monotonous existence; they bombard her energy with their own needs, clawing at her light, trying to break through her to get to Sirius.

While Evagria is strong, her energy begins to fade, tormented and drained by that of the mobs of unsettled entities. The two planes of the afterworld flicker in and out, moving from the monochromatic, dull nothing into the enlightened beauty, and back. Evagria's grip is loosening, her very being chipping away and cracking. She looks down sadly at Sirius who is too weak to retaliate. His emotional heart is breaking and the walls are closing in. It begins to feel like a lost cause. Sirius may very well spend the last moments of his life here.

*Who will repair this broken heart?*

## SENTRY THE DEFIANT

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*One evening, I got into an argument with our manager about something. I can't remember the details, whether he wanted me to try and write a hit or to be more clear in my lyrics or to just step out of my comfort zone during the writing process. I, on the other hand, felt I was already trying to do whatever it was with the material on this record. There was a baritone electric lying around the studio. I started to strum out the chord progression. The incident made me question the integrity of people who jump on the bandwagon with certain kinds of music because they are too consumed with what a scene dictates—or the financial aspect—to break out of the mold and do something they truly believe in. It's a reflection of what we, as a band create and how frustrating it was to have a person who believes in this thing we do as much as anyone, start to question whether what I was writing at the moment was good enough. It was a fleeting example of him playing devil's advocate, but it stuck with me.*

The distress call is heard, as Sentry the Defiant charges into the hopeless landscape like a soldier on the front line; quickly driving a wedge between the entities and the ailing Sirius. With the mass of unresolved souls now advancing on Sentry and Evagria, there isn't a moment to spare. Sentry takes over Sirius' body and instantly provides him sustenance. The Afterman becomes strong, his physiological levels returning to near-normal, as the unraveling maze of Sentry's life starts to unfold.

A Sergeant Major in Vic's army, Sentry was slowly climbing his way up to the higher ranks in a completely opposite way than Vic—with hard work and an incredible moral compass. Sirius views a scene he's watched before, where Vic has ordered Sentry to bomb the off-world structure, knowing that innocent people would be slaughtered. In this replay, the order is defied again, with Sentry returning to camp that night and confiding in another Sergeant about what had happened, knowing in his heart that his disobedience would not be taken lightly by a man like Vic. He intended to notify the Field Marshal the following day, but would not make it through the night alive. When he is found hanged the next morning, his fellow Sergeant was too afraid to pass the news on about Vic's illegal orders. The man kept his mouth shut—until years later, when loads of evidence regarding Vic's war crimes began to surface and the Sergeant finally came forward about what Sentry had told him that fateful night. Eventually, one of the guards involved in the murder turned himself in, too overcome with guilt to live with his demons any longer.

In addition to being charged for the heinous crimes, Vic was charged with Sentry's murder. In death, Sentry was awarded a postmortem Medal of Honor, his memory no longer cloaked in the shame of suicide. Rather than a coward, Sentry became a beloved figure, lauded for standing his moral ground and paying with his life.

Still--Sirius realizes as he watches the events pour out—Sentry's tale isn't quite as uplifting as it seems, considering Vic took his own life in the brownstone fire before he'd ever stand trial. Justice could never be served in life, leaving Sentry and Vic with unresolved

issues in the afterlife.

There is a physical fight between Sentry and Vic as they go head to head, Vic trying to punish Sentry. Sirius is caught in the middle of this, fighting AS Sentry because he is still in his possession, when it occurs to him that he may be able to give Sentry the insight he needs to move into the second level. Having experienced Evagria's feeling of a complete contentment, Sirius believes he understands the difference between her and the entities who remain in the middle plane is that the souls here seem unable to look past unresolved issues from their lifetimes. They carry the emotions from the world into the afterlife and it hinders them from moving on.

With their shared mind, as Vic continues to throw blows, Sirius backtracks within Sentry's maze, searching frantically for the memory of Sentry's hanging. Consumed by this entity, he feels the need to convince him to stop fighting back and to let go of this worldly grudge. The walls of the maze turn inside out, appearing to almost regurgitate the memories back. Sirius finally sports the familiar scene—the damp, dark barracks where Sentry's life came to an end.

Sirius sees Sentry's body dangling from the ceiling...the cloth wrapped tightly around his neck...his limbs shaking...the group of soldiers looking on, unaffected. Standing below him, Sirius urges Sentry to wipe this moment, to wipe all his human moments from his mind. Still in Sentry's possession, Sirius warns him that to continue holding onto this, will doom him to relive these memories forever.

*It doesn't matter now, Sentry. Just let it go. Move beyond. This moment does not define you.*

The entire scene stops; flash frozen in time. Then, as if a tiny pebble had been dropped within the molten image, a small ripple begins to flow out from Sentry's abdomen...followed by another and another still. Without warning, the noose around Sentry's neck bursts apart, light poking through his entire body like a million pin pricks. A heat fills the space, spreading out into every crevice of the maze. Sentry remains suspended where he once hung, now floating, cloaked in the same ethreal glow of Evagria. Sirius watches, his eyes wide and his

own cognition returning as the entity slowly begins to peel apart from his awareness. It's as if someone suddenly switched on every light in existence, flooding the world with radiance.

Sentry has crossed over.

Sirius is captivated, held in disbelief that he's witnessed this extraordinary thing. With droves and droves of entities, including Domino and Holly Wood approaching to occupy his body, his enchantment quickly comes to an end. With no other choice, he faces the swarm of souls moving toward him. He's afraid, but nearly ready to give up.

Just in time, Evagria consumes Sirius, bringing him along with her to the dimension of enlightenment. This is more than a glimpse. He can see it in its entirety now, in all its glory. Yet, as quickly as he arrived, he must leave. Evagria waves her hand—as if using her fingers to cut an opening in the space around her—and pulls up a portion of the materialized energy like a fishing net, showing Sirius the way out.

Free of the stifling vapors of the Keywork, the All Mother attempts to reconnect with remnants of the Meriwell to magnify their transmission signal to Heaven's Fence. The attempt fails. Relying on the only other option, she provides Sirius with the odds of survival for a descent back; the suit his only protection. She explains that his time spent in the Keywork is unlike the time measured on the Fence. What feels to Sirius like a week, has in actuality been 547 days. Her tone suggests that in his absence things have undoubtedly changed, asking him, “Do you still want to go home?”

That, is all he wants to do.

The All Mother plots the course of their return. If Sirius is able to navigate the descent before they break the atmosphere of Heaven's Fence, it's possible for him to land on a satellite station outside the planet Morlunus. If he misses the station, he will essentially free fall the remaining distance back to Heaven's Fence, the gravitational pull of the Keywork playing a dangerous factor. His odds of survival would decrease significantly.

The All Mother gives the prompt. Despite her being created for the singular purpose of servicing him, Sirius thanks her for her service and for keeping him company on this lonely



journey.

He glances at the firey light of the Keywork one last time. It remains as incredible as the first time he peered up toward it as a child, that gleaming cobalt structure lighting the sky and igniting so many questions within him. Only now, Sirius looks at it as a country conquered, as a new language finally mastered that he alone can understand. He's ready to return now to Meri, to the familiarity of his laboratory, to the normalcy he didn't know he'd miss so badly.

*Initiate free fall.*

*Against the odds, Sirius is able to make contact with the Morlunus space station, after air traffic control notices an unidentified object barreling toward the station and offer their assistance bringing him safely down. They're shocked that he's alive (not to mention, proud to be involved in the biggest news story of the year) and help to transport Sirius back to his home planet, where the whole world is waiting with bated breath to hear the story of the man who defied all odds for a glimpse at the unknown.*

## THE HARD SELL

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*The Hard Sell echoes the sentiments of Sentry, in the sense of so many people pulling you in different directions in this industry. No one in this band—or a lot of bands we know and respect—gravitated to music for reasons outside of an innate love for it. We started making music because, as cheesy as it may sound, it was, and is, one of the only ways to relieve ourselves of emotions that would otherwise just stay confined until they exploded in less productive ways. The need for validation from those who don't like what we bring to the table was never a concern because making music for them wasn't the catalyst to do it in the first place. The music we create is simply a result of what we are at any given moment. I'd rather just keep doing what we do and understand that if it continues to resonate with our audience, it just means we're doing something right.*

Upon returning to Valencine, Sirius is taken in for questioning, but given the traumatic nature of his voyage, it's decided he should be given some recovery time. As many truths tend to be, Sirius quickly realizes the things he witnessed in the Keywork could create complications for the people of Heaven's Fence and more persecution for himself in the scientific community. Equally as important is the difficulty of coming home alive to a world that has already accepted his death. A great deal can happen in 547 days and Sirius has been mourned, his loss accepted by his friends and family, who've begun to move on. His entire return is a hard sell.

Sirius confides in his mentor, Dr. Allen Linkev, a man he's trusted for decades, who thinks of Sirius as his own son. Linkev believes the discovery could be catastrophic, especially for someone who may want to try to harness the powerful souls of the Keywork. Linkev cautions that for the public to know that an afterlife exists, that it's not what they may have thought it would be and that their behavior in life holds no real weight on the after—could change the equilibrium of humanity, creating Fence-wide depression and potentially mass hysteria. Sirius respects Linkev's opinion, but wonders if he could use the discovery to help people transcend? Linkev argues that some things are better left untampered with.

Still, Sirius has given up so much to make this discovery, believing in truth so deeply that he put an irreparable strain on his marriage in the name of seeking. it. Now he's expected to keep that truth to himself?

Recognizing Sirius' indecision about keeping the makeup of the Keywork to himself, the Prise decide to pay him a visit. They reinforce Linkev's sentiments, explaining to Sirius that he has stumbled upon a secret of the universe which only the Prise were meant to know. Entrusted with the duty of protecting the structure and all its mysteries, they would be forced to view any exposure of those mysteries as an open declaration of war against them. This is information of the highest security and though they can do nothing about Sirius having found it out, should he share it with others, he must understand that he'd be firing the first shot in a planetary war which mankind could never win.

A press conference is held a few days later, to hear about the discoveries of this man who defied death in the name of science. Up to this point, Sirius has not been able to commit

to keeping the secret of the Prize to himself, deciding he will know the right decision when it sits before him. An older brunette reporter from a Fence-wide news network poses the first question, “Mr. Amory, can you tell us about your findings?”

As Sirius stands before the sea of press, he can feel the excitement, almost electric in the packed to capacity conference room. Bubbling up even more steadily in the audience, he feels a different emotion emitting from the crowd: Fear. Fear of the unfamiliar, fear of what this scientist might have to say, fear of having to question things they held true. He knows at that moment, it is not his place to share what he has learned.

Sirius substitutes an algorithm, combining physics, molecular structure and chemistry to scientifically explain away his findings about the energy of the Keywork and its relationship to the colony. The research community is thrilled. This is a theory they can finally wrap their heads around...one that follows the scientific method and can be replicated on their terms. The mission is the biggest historical accomplishment for mankind. He is honored with the first of an award created in his name: The Amory Award. In his acceptance speech, Sirius watches the crowd smiling back at him, the pride on their faces, the hope they have in something bigger than themselves...and he knows he's made the right choice. The impact of his choices in his personal life, however, haven't proven as positive.

Meri has a difficult time handling the abrupt return of her husband, who's reentered her life suddenly and without warning, like some living ghost. Of course she's never stopped loving Sirius, but after dealing with the stages of grief and finally accepting a future of which he has no part; it's not easy to revert to what feels like a different lifetime. She's cultivated a relationship with Colten, her knight-in-shining-armor from the bar. Colten, who never denied thinking Meri was the embodiment of his ideal woman from the moment he'd spotted her...who was patient with her indecision...who wanted nothing more than to discover everything about Meri with the same intensity Sirius had given to his work.

As the worlds at large champion Sirius' return, Meri struggles to find out where she falls in all that has happened. Would she appear a villain, leaving her husband; this hero who has returned as if he were a prisoner of war? Is love reason enough to backslide into a life that at times made her feel like she was on the outside looking in, when she's just getting settled into a new life where she is the epicenter? There are too many emotions for her to process, too many variables and uncertainties. And there is one more thing: it turns out Sirius is not the only one in the Amory family who can keep a secret: Meri's made a discovery of

her own.

## NUMBER CITY

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*This song was something I created on an old 1960s hollow body bass. The youngest song on the record, it is probably the most conceptual. It's about paramedics responding to the scene of a car crash. In its original version, Number City's lyrics were delivered as crazy dialogue from one of the EMT's perspectives, almost like a musical. They were so off-the-wall that Travis stepped up and voiced his opinion on the approach. He thought it sucked, ha, so I slightly tweaked the lyrics to be less singular and more about the group of medics. Also, instead of using a deeper bass voice delivery, I brightened the vocal back up. It was definitely for the better.*

*I envisioned Number City as a stripped down, simplistic arrangement, but as things usually do in the studio, it became much more elaborate by the end. The sound grew into something incredibly full and loaded with instrumentation. We also got a chance to explore the inclusion of a brass section in the band. By the end of the recording, everyone was dancing around the room to the horns.*

We flash forward from the acceptance of the Amory Award to the scene of a tragic accident. The medical response crew is already there. The EMTs survey the scene of the crash, unable to determine exactly why the driver lost control.

It's as if the vehicle exploded from within on collision, sending burning hunks of metal flying out in every direction at speeds so high that police find an entire melted door wrapped around a tree twenty feet away. There are shards of glass strewn about in every shape and size, reflecting the periwinkle glow of the Keywork as if the ground is sprinkled with stars. The victims were both ejected from the vehicle. The EMTs find Sirius first, who's been knocked nearly unconscious and is in critical condition. Meri is found contorted on the ground nearly five yards away, her limbs positioned at fatal angles. It's obvious she's taken the much harder hit in the crash.

The EMT's rush to get her on a stretcher, taking a blood sample for the transfusion she urgently needs. So much blood. Everywhere. Sirius struggles to listen to what's going on, his trauma reducing most of the medical jargon to calculations and numbers. The figures mean nothing to him but the passing of seconds...the fading of existence.

As they load Meri into the ICU emergency transport, the sample reveals more than a blood type, her body giving up the secret she'd been hiding. Her heart stops moments after and the EMTs work to kick start it again using a defibrillator as they speed off toward the hospital.

## GRAVITY'S UNION

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*One of my biggest fears in life is driving. It's been something I've struggled to do more as an adult simply to try and overcome that fear. The reason I have a hard time driving is because I feel so responsible for what would happen to the person in the passenger seat, namely my wife. When I wrote this song, I was thinking about the worst possible scenario I could ever think of in my life: She and I driving home and getting into an accident that left me alive and her gone, destroying the life we had build together. I couldn't live with myself. So in the story, I paralleled that with the accident of Sirius and Meri.*



We rewind back, just before the crash, to Sirius and Meri driving home together from the award ceremony. It's been a whirlwind since his return. A quick, intensely powerful tornado that picks up entire homes and drops them somewhere else. Her heart has been displaced and she's quietly contemplated where to go from here, finally deciding that she can't stay with Sirius.

Meri begins the conversation, telling Sirius how inexplicably proud she is of him. She knew the day would come that he'd be revered. He's far surpassed the goals he set out for himself and deserves the recognition that has been his reward. For her to bask in the glow of his glory—to continue on as if nothing has changed—would be unfair to him. They've both made sacrifices...but sacrifice, at times, meant one another.

She recalls a moment before the mission and the choice he made. Sirius can't help but feel she isn't being fair. "There was never a choice, Meri," an impassioned Sirius retorts, "And sacrifice? In the grand scheme of things, a year and a half of sacrifice in order to change the world doesn't seem so terrible. Can't you see? I came back for you!"

Meri confesses that she'll always love Sirius, but his absence has set in motion the irreversible reality that she cannot change. Sirius' anxiety starts to build as he continues driving. She reveals her relationship with Colten and that she's 3 months pregnant. Sirius is aghast, the news rips through him harder than any entity had, the shock causing him to lose his train of thought and instantly takes his attention from the road. The vehicle jumps the divider and smashes head on with a massive ground freighter, sending them both rocketing out of the windshield, lives reduced to nameless weight and mass. The couple are suspended in motion for one perfect second, before dropping dangerously to the pavement.

Rushed to the hospital, the couple is attended to by Dr. Straight, the man who saves the life of Sirius. Meri suffered a miscarriage on impact, but the doctor and his team are working tirelessly to save her.

## AWAY WE GO

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*This track is a reflection of when my wife and I met and the events that ensued.*

*This was before text messages and Skype, so, after meeting once, we spent months talking on the phone and emailing while I was touring and overseas. Our first actual “date” was in Asbury Park, NJ, where she and a friend drove 17 hours so we could see each other. I’ll confess to you now that I actually cancelled a show we had at the time so that she and I could have another day together; telling our booking agent at the time that I was sick—When he saw us having breakfast at a diner, he knew. It was a childish move, yes, but things happen for a reason. This is a pure, honest love song about all the places we’ve gone and all that we have left to go.*

=====AWAY WE GO=====

Many believe that just before you die, as the body flips between unconsciousness and cognizance, there is a profound experience. It can be described like oil and vinegar, or oil and vinegar and a million other ingredients, standing perfectly well on their own, each able to hold up their structure despite coexisting in one container together. If the body is like a container, the ingredients are ideas, abstractions like dreams, schemas of the afterlife, memories from the best and worst days we lived, repetition that has ingrained itself on our perception, shapes, sequences, feelings, choices, jingles we learned in school to memorize something important. There are the things we cannot remember consciously and the things we spend a lifetime trying to forget. In our final moments, perhaps it's as if the container is suddenly shaken up, taking all of our individual reveries and forcing them together, until what we believed to only make sense as separate, compartmentalized thoughts, now seem incredibly clear as a single fluid experience.

For Meri Amory, this moment occurs from a gurney, where Dr. Straight and his team of specialists are doing everything they can to pull her from the grip of death. To her, the doctors are faceless, white apparitions moving around a room that has metamorphosed into a collage of landscapes, events and ruminations. She views the space around her with newborn eyes. She is walking across a bridge, high above the trees. There are elaborate gazebos with pillars and columns hidden within them. She walks without a purpose, breathing in air so pure she believes she must be the first person to ever have breathed it.

Slowly, swirling in like a plastic bag caught up in a gust of wind, a sphere of light approaches; rings of color radiating and growing until the center is stretched so far it opens wide, leaving a hole of nothingness there. From the nothing, a small balcony draws out like an ellipse, a living gateway appearing there; a cloak extending forth a transparent figure from within that beckons to her, guides her. Meri continues to move down the path presented by the figure, knowing exactly where to go, despite never having been here before...she feels at ease...she's going home.

Then Meri is at the beach and she has definitely been here. Planet Hetricus. The Jersey City dunes. She's much younger and she's walking to meet a boy she's only met once before. Her pulse quickens, anticipating the encounter as she moves toward a rickety dock, completely overdressed for the midday heat. She can hear the trapped drum of her heart amidst the crash and slush of the waves. It's as if she might reach out and touch all the possibilities, all the promise this moment holds.

He sees her first. From then on, he'd constantly remind her that's how it happened. "I watched you come over that little wooden dock and we may as well have walked down the aisle then and there," he'd say. Eventually she would grow to question whether he'd changed his mind.

But, not now. Now is pure magic for a girl and a young scientist finding out for the first time that not everything can be explained with A LITTLE logic.

Finally, she sees him. He is love personified. There are no awkward words exchanged. There are no words at all yet, but an embrace held long enough to convey the feelings of two people glad to see each other, happy to no longer be apart. In this case, people who have been kept apart their entire lives and are only now realizing how much they've missed the other.

"It's nice to see you again, Sirius." she says. The boy opens his mouth to agree. Meri knows what he will say. She's thought of this moment over and over for the better half of her adult life.

But rather than words, a warm glow begins to emit from Sirius' mouth, as if he's breathing light around her, surrounding and comforting her. Now the waves have stopped where they rise, flattening out into a vastness that could go on forever, familiar likenesses and places developing in the transparency of the liquid.

Through the afterglow enveloping her, Meri watches as Sirius closes his eyes and disappears; the landscape reworking itself into an intricate labyrinth, massive doors opened in front of her. She, like those before her, will traverse this place indefinitely, into the world of the unknown, until the new becomes the monochromatic plane where wayward souls reside before they transcend...if they ever do.

With certainty and contentment she looks ahead, taking the first step into the maze.

Away we go.

# IRON FIST

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*Communication is incredibly difficult for me sometimes. I get frustrated often, and then I can't communicate the reasons behind that frustration. It's a vicious cycle. That's why writing music is so important to me. It's one of the only ways I feel like I can honestly communicate. When I was working on this song, I was away from home, thinking about how much I wish I was there. That compounded with the emotional roller coaster we'd been on with the tour cycle. "Iron Fist" is really an apology to my lady for letting my frustration get the best of me at times.*

Sirius is released from the hospital two weeks later. A car is hired to bring hm home as he's refused rides from everyone he knows. He does not want to see his friends or family, he doesn't want to talk to anyone. He needs this time alone to reflect on the devastating loss of his wife and the sequence of events leading up to it.

He watches out the window in the backseat. The day is beautiful, calm, clear. The indigo blaze of the Keywork seems warmer than usual, as if it were burning a little brighter now that it is home to the light of his life. The birds are singing. Sirius thinks to himself that this is the exact type of day Meri would have enjoyed and the realization that she is gone and not coming back punches him straight in the chest again. He thinks he may be sick and rolls down the window. He considers throwing himself from the moving vehicle, but he can't be moved to care about anything enough at this point to take action. This is a pain he can't medicate and a phenomenon he can't research his way out of. He's devastated.

Sirius' thoughts turn to regret for moments in their life together where his obstinacy got in the way of letting him show his real feelings for Meri. When she confessed on the drive, just before the crash, that she had found someone who not only put her first, but had given her the child she always wanted, Sirius was furious. Not at Meri...not even at Colten. He was angry with himself for not being the man to give her those things.

He had been stubborn, maybe even cruel in his departure from her, when she'd only wanted to love and keep him safe. He thought he'd feel fulfilled journeying into the Keywork; that he'd finally do something outstanding by discovering what no one had been able to see. Instead, he realizes that none of the things he's accomplished matter as much to him as Meri.

Now, like some universal attempt at irony, she has left for the Keywork without him. Only she won't be coming back.

## DARK SIDE OF ME

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*This song came pretty quickly as Travis was toying around with a melody line that caught my ear. We started to jam around the studio a little and I was so interested in where it could go, that I stayed up working on it in my hotel room until six in the morning. The next day we tracked the song.*

*The sentiment, “The dark side of me” is so cut and dry, but it’s something very personal to me. A step further than “Iron Fist”, this song pushes into the idea of truly allowing someone into your world. It’s easy to have a relationship and show each other only the beautiful shiny things. Sharing the good parts about you is elementary, so finding a partner in life can’t be only about showcasing these agreeable characteristics, but also the less impressive ones. In a strange way, true intimacy lies in that dark side—in making peace with the fact that it lives inside you somewhere—so that you can share it with the person and they can be there to help you overcome it.*



On the long ride home, Sirius thinks about a small plaque that sits on Allen Lunkev's desk, spelling out words of wisdom he often hears his mentor repeat: *No man is an island*.

"Mr. Amory," he'd begin, his tiny eyebrows joining forces with the deep crinkle in his forehead, "We are not made to go through existence entirely on our own. By joining our lives with others, only then can we become strong continents." It would not occur to Sirius until now that Linkev had been cautioning him specifically. Sirius had tried to remain an island his entire life.

As a scientist, he chose to research ideas no one else believed in, thinking that he must be the only man who truly understood the universe at work. Looking back, he's suddenly aware that he picked those topics because they were areas where he didn't have to rely on anyone else. He could remain in his own isolated brain without having to answer to other opinions or hypotheses. This character flaw eventually reared its head in his personal life too, causing him to push people away without knowing it. He kept Meri at arm's length—not intentionally—but because it's the only way he's ever known.

As he hobbles toward the front porch of the modest home he shared with Meri, his legs relying on two custom-fitted steel extensions to do the work as they heal, he feels something is not right. A man he's never seen before is there, sitting on the floor, his head tilted back against the wall of the house. At the sound of Sirius' footsteps, the man straightens, looking up with red, swollen eyes. His brain functioning slower than usual, Sirius catches a glimpse of the badge and instantly wonders if this police officer has come with even more bad news. His hair stands on end as he realizes who the man is. Colten.

The officer watches the ground as Sirius walks toward the porch, avoiding eye contact, seeming to work at avoiding any interaction altogether. Sirius puts the key in the door, half of him wondering if he can get inside without any confrontation, the other half hoping the man opens fire, raining down a barrage of punishment for all Sirius has taken from him. He

receives neither. Only one word: “Why,” Colten breathes; the utterance less a question than a judgement.

Sirius can't find a single reply for a query that has so many answers: Because I shouldn't have gone without her. Because I wanted redemption. Because I wanted to come home. Because emotions were high and I lost control of the vehicle. Because the transport we collided with was so much bigger. Because your unborn child was too fragile and Meri's heart was too weak and sometimes medicine fails us...and I'm perpetually failing.

Because you're a better man than I could hope to be.

He doesn't have to say anything as Colten stands—lack of sleep and emotional devastation creating the illusion he is far older than he is—and says, “You had a million chances to play the hero for her, but you made your choice and hers too. You left that woman in the dark and came act like you could just turn the light on? If you loved her, you would've stayed up there, Sirius. You would have let her go.”

Colten shakes his head, walking off the porch and into the downpour, leaving Sirius to shout out into the rain, “I'm sorry!”

He repeats the phrase over and over, crumbling down into himself on the welcome mat, his keys still in the door.

## 2'S MY FAVORITE 1

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*For all the heaviness on this track listing, we come full circle again with this final song, which is about acknowledging that there is an innocence to loving another human being that cannot be duplicated with any event or circumstance or possibility. If we are so fixated on the things we are trying to attain, we overlook what we have. It's an age old concept, but one that we all need reminding of every now and then. "Home" is always something I thought I had a very solid representation of, but as an adult, it's grown bigger than what it was in my childhood. The line, "I admit that I'll never feel alone, Once I call you Home" is meant to say that I've found a person who fits...my wife is my home. I don't think there could be a better song to drive home the message of The Afterman.*

Sirius reconnects to the All Mother mainframe, her programming upgraded and implanted inside the mobile suit. This ship—he calls it Saudade—is far more advanced than the last he guided into the reaches beyond Heaven’s Fence, acquired through a generous grant meant to continue his exploration of the Keywork. Sirius gladly accepted the funding, but with very different intentions as to how he will use it. He cannot divulge why he’s going—after all, no one within Heaven’s Fence knows about the truth of the Keywork. Now, he has abandoned all his previous motivations, to focus on a new one entirely: Sirius will return to the Keywork to give his wife what he couldn’t in life.

“I am coming back to you, Meri. I can’t change the past, but I can give you something better. I can give you *everything*.”

Sirius knows from witnessing it firsthand that the Keywork holds the secret to the afterlife. Meri’s soul must be there and he’s going to locate her, to help her transcend to the Samaritaine, the Utopia he knows exists beyond. He was wrong about his last voyage—it was not the greatest journey of his life. It was just the beginning.

He programs the Keywork into the All Mother’s navigation system and she questions him, asking if maybe he’s requesting the wrong coordinates. He assures her that the destination is not a mistake. He is ready to return. She is unsure what is driving him there again, considering she operates entirely on rational decisions and revisiting a place that nearly killed him doesn’t seem like a very sound choice to make.

“Sirius, is this what love is?” she questions.

He answers, “Yes.”